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**"PEASANTS" AGAINST THE NANO? NEOLIBERAL INDUSTRIALIZATION
AND LAND QUESTION IN MARXIST-RULED WEST BENGAL, INDIA.**

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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DISSERTATION ADVISOR: Dr. BONNIE J. McCAY

Why do regimes that have been traditionally and ideologically opposed to liberal policies adopt neoliberal policies of industrialization? Why do these regimes not abandon courting the big private investors to set up industries, in spite of popular protests in the villages against acquisition of land for these industries? This dissertation tries to answer the above questions with respect to recent developments in the Indian province of West Bengal, which has been ruled by a democratically elected Marxist government for the last thirty years. These questions have been addressed in the context of China and other Asian economies, which are ruled by authoritarian regimes. The significance of looking at the West Bengal case is that it has a democratically elected regime with a considerable populist credential, especially in terms of undertaking redistributive land reforms in the villages. Thus external pressures of a global

and national economy and elitist urge to industrialize are important but inadequate explanations for a parliamentary Marxist regime's adoption of neoliberal industrialization policies. Hence, this dissertation explores citizenship and moral claims on the state based on the self-understanding of the villagers formed within a social field structured as much by democracy, development and land reforms as by transnational influences and forces. I argue that the government's drive for industrialization and the protests against land acquisition have to be understood within the context of this complex field of social relations and distinctions in the villages that crucially depend upon both land and non-farm employment. By looking at this social field, the dissertation complicates the images of protests and "peasants" which, viewed from afar, appear to be anti-neoliberal, anti-developmental, anti-industrial or anti-globalization. Therefore, this dissertation is also a critical reflection on the "distance" that pervades the urban activists' and state's perceptions and representation of the "rural" and the "peasant".

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Writing and research are lonely exercises. Yet, a dissertation is a culmination of a long and arduous journey of growing up as a person who is indebted to his family members, friends, cohorts, and mentors for their encouragement, support and guidance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: “Peasants” Against the *Nano*? Neoliberal Industrialization¹ and the Land Question in Marxist-Ruled West Bengal, India.

This dissertation aims to contribute to the anthropological understanding of rural societies, globalization, and development. Through an ethnographic exploration of rural society in West Bengal and the protests against industrialization and land acquisition, this dissertation shows the complexity of rural identity formation in the context of globalization in South Asia.

This dissertation critically examines the category of “peasant.” Although I will refer to the villagers in the study sites as villagers and small landholders, the term “peasant” has been used in many discourses concerning them and their situation. In that sense this is a study of the plight of the peasantry and peasant resistance in the context of globalization.² The idea of the peasant plays a key role in conceptualizing the rural society and distinguishing the rural from the urban. Most debates about and definitions of peasants have focused on their presumed social, economic, cultural, and political characteristics. However, peasants described in the academic and anthropological works as revolutionary or resistant to modernization never seemed to exist in the real world because the groups identified as peasant types have multiform identities that defy any unitary classification of them in terms of certain inherent characteristics associated with agricultural production, control or ownership of land and a

¹ By industrialization, I mean expanding the manufacturing sector.

² The key texts regarding reconceptualizing “peasants” have been written by Michael Kearney (1996), Roger Rouse (1991), Anthony Bebbington (1999), Tania Li (2007), and Akhil Gupta (1997).

primary orientation toward subsistence farming (Kearney 1996:55). The concept of peasant is deployed in various contexts to justify particular kinds of political actions and development policies and also to claim rights over land and resources.³ However, intellectual currency of the term peasant, as Michael Kearney (1996) shows, crucially depends on an opposition between “peasant ways of life” and the urban ways of life. The romanticized opposition has enormous strategic value in challenging the hegemony of policies that tend to favor large capitalists but political outcomes of such romanticized resistance are far too complex to be understood in terms of emergence of alternatives to global or national economic regimes that tend to favor large capitalists at the expense of ordinary citizens. The term “peasant” privileges certain ideas about “the rural” and certain romantic ideas about the villagers and thereby suppress multiple and contradictory voices. This creates what John Gledhill (2000:214) calls “dilemmas of speaking.”

Until recently, I have taken this category of peasant at its face-value. Two paradoxes that I encountered during my field work in Indian villages where land was acquired by the provincial government changed my perspectives on

³ Roseberry (1989:109) notes, “It was not until after World War II that anthropologists began to notice, worry about, and conceptualize fundamental differences between primitive and peasants.” For Robert Redfield, “the peasants” are situated at the midpoint on the folk-urban continuum.

Michael Kearney (1996: 38) writes that “with the government and corporate money available to support, by the 1960’s research on peasant societies had become a growth industry in anthropology. Several milestones of this trend are the founding in the early 1970’s [issues] of *Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Peasant Studies Newsletter*”

“peasants.” The dissertation is based on these paradoxes. It reflects on the theoretical questions that the paradoxes raise and tries to show how ethnography can address these questions. In raising the theoretical questions and addressing them through an ethnography of small landholding and landless villagers and urban activists and their politics in West Bengal province in India, this dissertation questions the categories of the “rural” and the “peasant” and in so doing adding to understanding of the trajectory of global policy regimes such as neoliberalism in various sites around the world.

Broader Context of this Ethnography

Before, I discuss the paradoxes, I would like to clarify what I mean by “liberalized” Indian economy and also what I mean by neoliberal industrialization. In this section, I will also give a brief overview the events and issues that my ethnography studies.

In the post-independence years, i.e. after the year 1947 when India attained independence from British rule, the economic model that came to dominate the Indian economy was known as the “mixed economy.” Mixed economy, promoted by the first Prime Minister of India—Jawaharlal Nehru and his economic advisor P.C. Mahalanobis--sought to promote capitalist enterprise within the framework of a planned economy dominated mainly by public

enterprises in the sector of heavy industries such as iron and steel, mining, transport, and telecommunications (see Chakrabarty and Lal 2007).

In order to set up big industries, such as the automobile manufacturing plant that the automaker Tata motors was trying to set up in West Bengal, the private company would apply for permission from the Central or Federal government. The central government would influence the private entrepreneur's decision regarding where the latter would set up the factory (see Marjit 2000). The permission was called "the license." Since the 1990's, this policy of "license" was partly abandoned in favor of promoting competition among provinces to court large capitalist firms. The Leftists in the Indian parliament, particularly the Marxist party that rules the West Bengal province, had opposed the policy because the policy was shaped by the wider neoliberal way of thinking that was promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The shift prompted many provinces or states in India to compete to invite investment in their provinces by providing tax-free entry and other subsidies. This competition has been identified as one of the chief characteristics of "neoliberal industrialization" by anthropologists such as John Gledhill (1998: 12) and by geographers such as David Harvey (1991). Such competition, they have claimed, helps big corporations to maximize profits in low-wage production sites where investors are promised tax-free entry.

Therefore, by neoliberal industrialization I mean the particular model of industrialization where states or provinces compete to attract private capital to set up industries inside their territories. In India, intense competition among provinces or states is fairly recent, i.e. a post-1990's development.⁴ The 1990's were a watershed moment in Indian history because those years saw major changes in Indian economic policy that included participation of foreign multinationals in the economy, an emphasis on export, and incentives to homegrown and foreign corporations. These changes are collectively understood as "Liberalization." The chief architect of these policies in the 1990's was the finance minister of India, Manmohan Singh, who belonged to the Congress Party. The changes brought about by Liberalization policies in India were dubbed by the World Bank as "a quiet economic revolution" that "has fundamentally altered India's development strategy."⁵

Therefore, the wider political-economic context of my ethnography is the liberalized Indian economy where provinces intensely compete to court private investors by providing them with subsidies and cheap land. In 2006, the Marxist regime in the province of West Bengal joined the competition to persuade the automaker Tata Motors to build their factory in the province. To do this the regime acquired land in a place called Singur, 40 kms away from Calcutta, by

⁴ There was competition among states earlier, but in the post-1990's the competition intensified.

⁵ World Bank Country Operations, Industry and Finance Division, Country Department II, South Asia Region, India: Country Economic Memorandum – Five Years of Stabilization and Reform: The Challenges Ahead (8 August 1996).

applying the Eminent Domain Act that empowers the state agencies to acquire land for a public purpose. The site was chosen by the automaker; the Marxist regime agreed to provide the land. Since then, the Marxist government and Nano, the name of the automobile to be produced at this site, have been in the news, particularly regarding the forcible acquisition of land from the peasants. Ironically, the Marxist regime is known for its land redistributive policies and also enjoys substantial support in the West Bengali villages for its pro-peasant stand, rhetoric, and implementation of policies that secured the small landholders' ownership of and access to land.

The car that was to be produced is the Nano—the much hyped cheapest “People's car” and also the smallest one. Nano became the symbol of neoliberal industrialization. Taking positions vis-à-vis the Nano, i.e. supporting it or opposing it, shaped the spectrum of political opinions in India and WB. Debates regarding the land acquisition and setting up of the Nano factory propelled certain villages in the Singur block into national and global prominence. The ultra-left parties, activists such as Medha Patkar and other left leaning urban intellectuals and activists, and the main opposition party in the province criticized the ruling Marxists in West Bengal for their dealings with the Tata company. They saw the use of eminent domain to acquire land from the so called “peasants,” as a violation not only of democracy but also of Marxist ideals. Thus, like the Nano, the iconic figure of the peasant also became equally charged with

meaning. Many activists, such as Pranab Kanti Basu (2008:1024) described the government action as land grab and quoted David Harvey (2006: 18) to show that the government is facilitating “accumulation by dispossession,” i.e. facilitating the large capitalists’ accumulation of profit and capital by dispossessing the “peasants” of their land.

West Bengal’s Geographical Location and Political History: Brief Sketch

West Bengal is the easternmost state of India. Before India’s partition in 1947, West Bengal was part of the Bengal province. The eastern part of the Bengal province had merged first with Pakistan and was known as East Pakistan. In 1977 East Pakistan broke away from Pakistan and emerged as an independent nation of Bangladesh. The Partition had changed the political party-configuration of West Bengal in the post-Independence years. While the nationalist Congress Party had ruled the province for the first twenty years after Indian independence, since the late sixties, Marxists parties of various kinds started dominating the political scene of West Bengal.

The current Marxist regime in West Bengal consists of many Marxist parties, which are collectively called the Left Front. However, the party that is the dominant partner in the coalition is called the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The other parties in the coalition are the Communist Party of India, Forward Bloc, and the Revised Socialist Party. The left coalition had first come to power in West Bengal in 1967 as partners in a coalition dominated by non-

Marxist parties and the coalition was called the United Front. The redistributive land reform measures began in 1967. However, the land reforms program was discontinued since 1969. West Bengal had plunged into political turmoil because of the rise of the Maoist revolutionaries, who had broken away from the CPI (M) because of disagreements over the idea of joining parliamentary politics.

Authoritarian moves by the Congress party under the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Center or at the Federal scale also added to political instability in West Bengal. The rise to power by the Left Front government in 1977 under the leadership of the CPI (M) had stabilized the political situation in West Bengal. The effective land reform measures and registration of sharecroppers that gave tenant farmers permanent access to land had helped the CPI (M) and the Left Front maintain a strong rural support base. It is because of this support base that the Left Front government had been re-elected to power seven times consecutively. While the Left rule in West Bengal saw steady improvement in the agricultural sector, the industrial decline of West Bengal was hastened primarily due to trade union politics of the left parties. The political stability of the Left Front and West Bengal was, however, shaken by the protests against land acquisition that began in the year 2006 when I went to the field.

The Marxist regime, which returned to power for the 7th consecutive time with a large number of seats in the assembly, viewed the project as a crucial one for an industrial turn-around of the state. Legally, there was little room to contest a state government's decision to site an industrial zone at the heart of a thriving

farming community because the Indian land acquisition act of 1894 (revised in 1984) empowers state agencies to acquire any land for a "public purpose" by paying proper compensation to the affected parties.

The term "public purpose" may seem to refer to projects related to general social welfare of villages or the state; however, recently the Indian Supreme Court (the court at the central scale) judges have remarked that "public purpose" cannot and should not be precisely defined because the public purpose changes with time and requirements of the community. Thus, the Supreme Court has left it to the discretion of the states to decide what a public purpose is, a situation similar to that of "eminent domain" in the United States. The representatives of the Marxist party in the Indian parliament had appealed to the federal or central government to centrally specify the spots where industries could be set up to avoid an unproductive competition among provinces to vie for investments from private companies and thereby agreeing to their terms and conditions. Such petitions were not accepted. Consequently, the state government in West Bengal had claimed that generation of employment in automobile manufacturing plant and in its ancillaries is a public purpose to justify the acquisition of land.

Here are some important features of the acquisition of the land in Singur. There are numerous small factories in the vicinity of the area that was acquired. The most notable among these factories is a chemical factory which is located very close to the site that was chosen for the Nano factory. The state or the provincial government acquired approximately 997 acres of land. 12,000 checks

were issued to compensate 12,000 landowners who owned plots in the area that was acquired. The compensation for each plot was a little more (150 percent) than the market price. 3,000 checks were issued to compensate the registered sharecroppers.⁶ The most important feature of the acquisition was that homesteads were not touched and hence there was no physical displacement of people. According to the government ministers, physical displacement would not have let the villagers take advantage of the direct and indirect incomes that the factory generated.

There were controversies regarding choice of the factory site. The government claimed that it had shown to Tata Motors five sites for building the factory, but the company chose the site in Singur because of its proximity to the city of Calcutta, the provincial capital, and also because Singur was well-connected with other parts of India through road and railway networks. Moreover, another automobile factory, Hindusthan Motors was also located 20 km away from the site. As I will discuss in the following chapters, the chosen site in Singur was not completely agricultural. Approximately, 700 acres of the stretch were agricultural and 300 acres were swampy land.

The key issue that emerged out of the protests by the villagers unwilling to part with their land and the urban radical left activists who got an opportunity to vent their grievances against the large capitalists was that if agricultural land

⁶ Sharecroppers were offered 25 percent of the amount that was offered to the landowners. Not all sharecroppers in the area were registered. I will write about that in the second chapter.

can be appropriated for industrialization. The activists, rural and urban, claimed that “the peasants” have an emotional bonding with the land that they cultivate. The protestors, activists and the opposition party politicians said that land is like a mother to “the peasant.” They asserted that land nurtures the peasant and hence the significance of land to the peasant cannot be measured in terms of monetary compensation. The state government initially offered only monetary compensation and invited the activists several times for a dialogue regarding rehabilitation. The activists refused to go into any dialogue and reasserted their claim that land acquisition cannot be compensated. The state government got approximately 75 percent of the land with the consent of the landowning villagers who accepted the compensation checks. Although the state government acquired the land with the help of the police force and started building the factory, protests continued. The protests culminated in road blockades and physical harassing of the Tata officials and the workers in the factory. Such events led the Tata Company to shift its factory from Singur to Sanand in Gujarat. After the announcement of the shift counter-protests began to bring back the factory in Singur.

First Paradox

The first of the two paradoxes that I encountered in my field site was that a Marxist provincial government, open to claims on behalf of the villagers, nonetheless adopted neoliberal industrial policy in a way that threatened to

displace peasants or dispossess them of the land that they had received under the same Marxist regime's land redistributive policies. Theoretically, the paradox was that a regime ideologically opposed to liberal policies was adopting neoliberal industrialization. This has become very commonplace in Asia as Leftist or communist regimes in China and Vietnam adopt neoliberal policies and invite investments from big capital even though they are ideologically opposed to liberal economic policies. For example, the newly elected Maoist Prime Minister of Nepal, Prachanda had also invited Indian businessmen to build Special Economic Zones in Nepal.⁷

Second Paradox

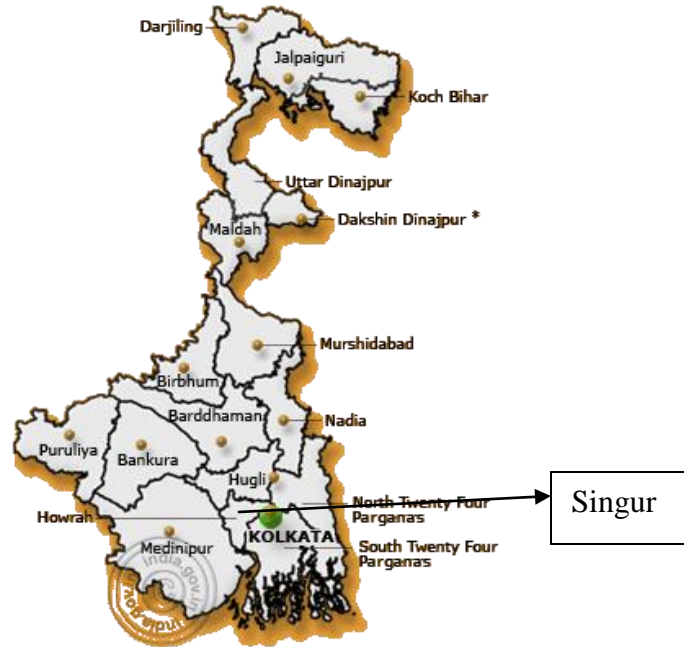
The second paradox that I encountered was that despite local, national, and international protests, there was silent, and later overt, local approval of the project. Such approval among many ordinary villagers surfaced in the form of vehement support for Nano only after Tata motors pulled out in [2008 or 2009?] because of continuing protests. More than 5000 villagers traveled to the city of Calcutta from villages in Singur to demonstrate that they were in favor of the factory [Figure x]. Many villagers who protested against the acquisition of land and building of the factory on farmland had joined the workforce. Initially more

⁷ The Telegraph, Calcutta September 18, 2008 p.1. However, Prachanda has resigned as the Prime Minister of Nepal for his party's disagreements with the Nepal's army

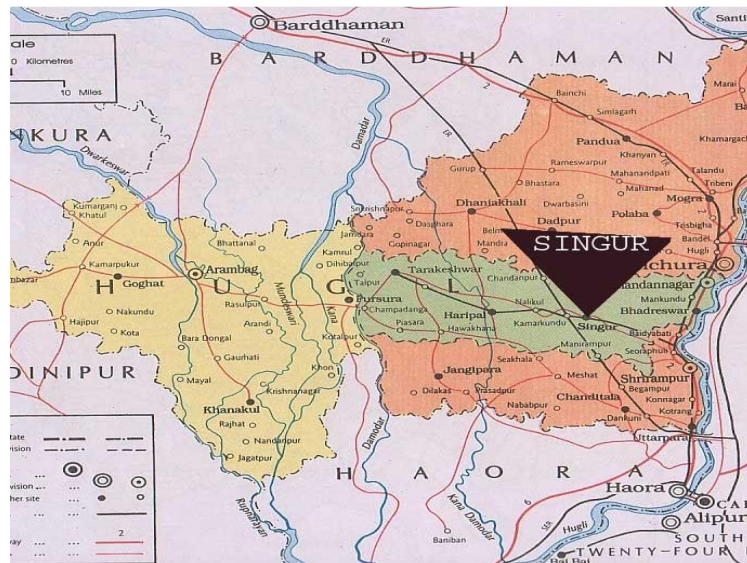
than seven hundred villagers joined the workforce that built the boundary walls around the 1000 acres of land acquired by the government. The number of villagers who actively participated in the project rose to approximately 3000.

In many cases, relatives, such as sons and daughters of the protesting villagers, took training for work in the factory. Thus, the second paradox is that actions or practices of the regime or the provincial government are viewed by the people most directly affected as arbitrary or unjustified and perfectly acceptable or justified or natural at the same time.





Map2. Map of West Bengal



Map 3. Showing Singur in Hooghly district of West Bengal.



Figure 1.1: Protests Against Land Acquisition.



Figure 1.2: The factory was built on the acquired land before the Tata decided to pull out due to continued protests (Personal).

Figure 1.3 and 1.4 (below) Counter-protests.



Figure 1.5: Counter-protests announcing “we are in favor of the factory.”



Figure 1.6: Photograph from a government poster showing easy cohabitation of the “peasant” and the Nano. Source: West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation website: <http://www.wbidc.com/>

Geographers and anthropologists have grappled with the first paradox, especially in the context of authoritarian Marxist regimes of South-east Asia, and addressed it in terms of elitist urges or external pressures (Ong 2006, Harvey 2007) External pressures of the global and national economy and elitist urges to industrialize are important explanations for the adoption of neoliberal industrialization policies in West Bengal as in China and other Asian economies. However, they are inadequate to the task of explaining why a parliamentary Marxist regime would do so, especially when it is expected to be very open to claims on it by small landholding villagers, its primary support base. By exploring the paradox in the case of the parliamentary Marxists and by interrogating the category of peasant, this dissertation will look at the complex

meanings and identities of land ownership in a neo-liberalizing but still socialist regime.

The complexity is missed by both the provincial Marxist state and the Left activists because of their embeddedness in a particular culture of Leftism that fetishizes villages and romanticizes “the peasant.” The peasant becomes the key actor, who acts either in favor of industries or against them—who has either a revolutionary consciousness or an autonomous subaltern consciousness, in either case un-captured by capitalism or commodity-culture. The lived realities of Singur and other villagers are far more variable, complex and integrated into capitalism and commodity culture.

I argue that the government’s drive for industrialization and the protests against land acquisition and the counter-protests for bringing back the factory must be understood within the context of a complex field of social relations and distinctions in the West-Bengali villages. This social field crucially depends upon both land and non-farm employment and is influenced by a general desire for “improvement” (Li 2007). By looking at this social field, the dissertation complicates the images of protests, villagers, and “peasants” that, viewed from afar, appear to be simply anti-developmental, anti-industrial, or anti-globalization.

The Questions

One question that this dissertation seeks to address is: Why did the Marxist regime adopt neoliberal industrialization and why does it not abandon courting big capitalists in spite of protests over land acquisition? More generally, the question that I want to raise is: Why do regimes that have been traditionally and ideologically opposed to liberal policies adopt neoliberal policies of industrialization? The second question is: Why were the actions or practices of the regime or the provincial government cast as arbitrary or unjustified and perfectly acceptable or justified or natural at the same time?

The West Bengal case, I believe, may also throw light on a political phenomenon that has become very common in Asia in recent years. We have seen time and again that regimes traditionally opposed to liberal policies have adopted neoliberal forms of industrialization. This coexistence of socialist formations with feverish capitalist activity is seen as an anomaly and has been explained in terms of double standards of the regime or leadership by the left liberal thinkers in the US and elsewhere. For example, David Harvey (2007:120) observed that Deng Xiaoping could be a secret “capitalist roader” to express the incomprehensibility of China’s embracing of neoliberal economic reforms. Similarly, Perry Anderson (2007) blames the new leadership of the Marxist regime for the current pro-neoliberal reform position of West Bengal’s three decade-old left wing government. Scale-wise, China and West Bengal cannot be

compared. Yet the comments made by the left liberals are uncannily similar in that they claim the strangeness (Harvey 2007: 120) of the “coexistence of socialist formations with feverish capitalist activity” (Ong 2006:12).

Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2006) criticizes such explanations and asks us to shift the analytical angle from typologies of states as unitary actors with certain ideological moorings (such as the Marxist state, Socialist state, Islamic state) to logics of practices or actions of government or political practices of the state. Similarly, neoliberalism can be seen in terms of practices or actions of the government or the logic that they embody. If neoliberalism is viewed in terms of political practices one can track the mobility of neoliberal practices, and their adoption by various kinds of regimes. These neoliberal practices tend to favor certain categories of talented and educated professionals who are more beneficial to the goal of generating profit than are the general citizenry (for example a software engineer is more beneficial to generating profit than a farmer).

By doing this, neoliberal political practices can run counter or stand out as exceptions to the dominant practices that are, for instance, based on a territorial logic that entitles citizens to resources and privileges simply by virtue of being born or being a resident within a particular territory—the nation-state, the province, or the locality. Neoliberal practices operate by separating the national economy, which is given more importance, from the national anthropos or people or citizens, which is given less value or weight in the political practices of

the state. Thus, the livelihoods of the “peasant” can be sacrificed in the name of the “economy” or private-investment-driven economic development.

Ong’s (2006) analytic of exception is an apt characterization of the Marxist regime's actions to please private investors, especially the application of the eminent domain act (an act that is used to acquire land for building public facilities, such as schools, hospitals, roads and railways) to acquire land for a private company. The deployment of the police force against the same small landholding villagers who saw police acting in their favor to acquire land from the big landlords thirty years ago also stands out as an exception. “This government gave us land so why are they taking that away,” wondered many protesting villagers unwilling to accept compensation for their plots. Moreover, the general pro-industrial rhetoric of the provincial government valorized expatriate and non-Bengali entrepreneurs and engineers. This is in sharp contrast to the practice of extolling “the peasantry” and “the rural” that the Marxists in West Bengal have usually done. Thus, the Marxist regime was trying to modify or reorient the relations between individual political subjects or citizens of West Bengal, especially the villagers or small landholders and the political power of the regime.

Improvement Discourse and Development

Yet, the simple “exception” framework of reasoning to explain the West Bengal case may yield inaccurate conclusions because, as noted earlier, West Bengal has a democratically elected Marxist regime with considerable populist credentials. Hence, I do not simply focus on a break between the dominant and exceptional government techniques or practices to explain the paradoxes or to answer the questions that they raise. We also need to look at continuities, such as how the dominant techniques and moral and citizenship claims based on territoriality set the context for the exceptional techniques to be invoked by the elected regime to please the private investors. This approach is absolutely essential to see why actions of the Marxist regime seem both arbitrary and natural to the villagers.

The common theme that connects the dominant practices of government and the practices of government that make exceptions, I claim, following Tania Li (2007), is the discourse on “improvement.” According to Li, the “will to improve” is a contradictory tendency by which the powerful expect to erase and at the same time to maintain their difference from the marginal, the non-dominant or the subaltern. Development, welfare, and workfare projects are designed to improve the conditions of people. However, there is an inevitable gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished. The urge to improve is often driven by an elitist desire, Li argues, to help the people who are

considered “poor,” “primitive,” or “backward” to “advance” and make them modern. Thus, according to Li, will to improve is primarily elitist and shapes the outlook of the regimes or the governments, the bureaucrats, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and also the urban activists and informs their administrative practices.

However, improvement discourse not only shapes particular regimes or governments but also the subjectivities and self-understandings⁸ of the villagers by giving new significances to already existing differences within the rural population, as shown by Laura Ahearn (2001), and Stacy Pigg (1997) in the context of Nepal and also by Akhil Gupta (1997) in northern India. It is this discourse of improvement in conjunction with democracy and land reforms and transnational influences that shape the social field of distinctions, relationships, and self-understandings in the villages of West Bengal. I therefore contend that, in order to understand the relationships between exceptional techniques or practices and the dominant techniques of government, one must focus on the social field that shapes self-understandings and distinctions in West Bengali villages, which generates citizenship and moral claims on the state based on a discourse of improvement.

⁸ According to Sherry Ortner, subjectivity is a complex structure of thought, feeling, reflection, and modes of perception, affect, desire that animate acting subjects. These modes are shaped by social formations and political power. This makes social beings more than occupants of particular positions and holders of particular identities (Ortner 2005: 35, 37).

Tania Li's (2007) path-breaking conceptualization of the improvement discourse and her critique of James Scott's conception of state are particularly useful in understanding the theoretical problems that this dissertation tries to address. Li's (2005: 12) study of improvement discourses and practices critically reflects on a spatial optic characteristic of James Scott's (1998) work on the state — i.e. an “up there” and “all-seeing state.” Instead Li, like Ong (2006), turns our attention to the administrative practices of the state or what she calls “practices of government.” This helps one to conceptualize the paradox of a Marxist state adopting neoliberal reforms from an ethnographic perspective that explores the desires and demands of villagers and more importantly identities of the villagers.

However, Li's identification of the “will to improve” with the urban elites, such as experts, missionaries, officials, activists and the NGOs, builds on a distinction between the urban and the rural — the former being the outside and the latter the inside. Therefore, for Li, “will to improve” is always external to rural society. This kind of conceptualization can be useful in circumstances that Li studies. However, my field site — the Bengal delta — has always been embedded in the global economic processes through colonialism; through growing of cash crops, such as jute; through developmental interventions such redistributive land reforms and the Green Revolution; and more importantly, through migration. Hence, the discourse of improvement shapes the regime and government as it shapes the villagers and their identities because the interactions

between the urban and the rural and the development interventions also reconfigure how the individuals or villagers understand themselves.

Anthropologist Akhil Gupta (1997:320) has also recognized that identities based on discourse of improvement that inculcate in individuals a desire to be developed are inescapable features of everyday life in contemporary north India. Gupta says that the teleological views of history, a belief in progress, a conviction of one's own backwardness compared to the West, and a naturalization of the spatial imperatives of the nation-state or the province, inform the self-understanding of post-colonial subjects. However, this state of being modern is not homogeneous across the political geographical space of the nation-state. Nonetheless, Gupta says, such understanding of oneself in terms categories such as modern or non-modern or developed or underdeveloped is a social fact in the villages of North India, not merely an analytical choice available to the scholar. In this dissertation, I argue that the desire generated by understanding of oneself in terms of certain evolutionary categories produces a moral economic space between the villagers and the state, which is laden with contradictory demands, and the contradictions are enhanced by the global rise of neoliberalism as a policy choice, and dwindling sizes of landholding. Hence, it is not only an urge to stay globally competitive or an elitist urge to improve. Neoliberal policies of the Left government are also an effect of a small landholding "peasantry" trying to venture out into non-farm spheres, which is understood as the domain of progress and modernity or the domain of the "developed" (the English word

that is locally used in my field site). Yet, the regime or the state can provide non-farm employment or “development” only by establishing factories or by promoting urbanization that require land. Neoliberal industrialization as policy choice adds to the contradiction because the state and the regime have less power to choose or select the site for manufacturing industries.⁹

Such contradictions may often lead to redefining the ideas of improvement and of modernity (Escobar 1998, Cooper and Packard 1997) that are primarily elite discourses. The subaltern groups may redefine the ideas of improvement and modernity in terms of the same collective identities that are used by the administrators, bureaucrats or activists to categorize them as the target population who require improvements or development. Li (2007) refers to the latter process as strategic reversibility of power relations through which subaltern classes strategically use the dominant administrative categories to contest or challenge the projects based on the same hegemonic categories. For example, “the indigenous peasant” was seen as a backward group requiring expert advice and intervention, but the indigenous peasant groups also used their indigenous identity to assert autonomy and claims over land and other resources. The demands and claims are based on diagnoses of deficiencies imposed from above. These demands are backed by a sense of entitlement, Li (2007) argues. Yet, contestations of projects of improvement by farmers, peasants

⁹ The Tata company was shown many sites in West Bengal apart from Singur, but it chose Singur because of its vicinity to the national highway which connects West Bengal to northern and western India.

or villagers cannot transcend the discourse of modernity or improvement, as many activists and intellectuals seem to think (Gupta1997).

Moreover, a new dimension is added to the concept of strategic reversals if we consider that categories that define target populations are also influenced by the actions of the individuals and groups belonging to the powerful sections within target population or subaltern groups. This is precisely what I am going to show in the case of emergence and significance of the category of “the peasant” in the context of Left politics and redistributive land reform in West Bengal. A consideration of the latter would complicate the image of “the peasant.”

I will also show that improvement discourse is not simply an elite discourse but is also used by small landholding section of West Bengali peasantry to distinguish itself from the landless laborers. The first and second chapters will show how the small and supervisory landholders’ sense of entitlement to their land was generated and maintained by cultivating a “developed” *chashi* (or farmer) identity. In the process, they deprived the landless groups, whom the small landholders called “underdeveloped” *majurs* or laborers, from having proper rights or access to land. The cultivation of the *chashi* identity was based on dispersion of urban and elite ideas of progress and improvement through Left politics.

Identities and Improvement Discourse

Once we consider the internal differentiations within subaltern groups and fractures within collectivities (see McCay 2001; Agrawal and Gibson 2001) and how ideas of improvement, progress, and development inform and maintain such distinctions and identities, the idea of strategic reversibility gets more complicated because strategic reversals may favor one group over the other. Hence, the protests and struggles that result from contradictions within the discourse of improvement must also be understood in terms of how improvement discourse influences identities, self-understandings, and subjectivities that create and sustain differentiations within the subaltern groups and collectivities.

Li (2007: 45) draws on Stuart Hall to analyze identities. Identities are “positionings” because identities are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power. They are always emerging in particular historical and political economic contexts. While place and locality can be sources of identity, differentiation within villages also produces identities based on self-understandings informed by development discourse. Such identities often take local groups as points of reference. Identities can be produced at the intersection of democracy and development. Some local groups or individuals may use schemes of improvement and their closeness to political parties to acquire social power or secure development benefits and government employment and thereby

produce more cosmopolitan identities or “positionings” vis-à-vis others less powerful than them.

Li (2005) uses the concept of positioning to construct a dualistic model comprised of bipolar social standing or political stance (such as dominant and subaltern and acquiescent or resistant). Building on Li (2005), if we try to understand schemes of improvement in terms of multiple poles where local is also marked by subtle differences among the villagers, the persistence of the “will to improve” and its neoliberal ramifications across regimes can be understood with proper nuance. Hence, attention must be paid to differentiation within the local, the village, and therefore within the so called “peasantry.”

To understand differentiation among or within the “peasantry,” I turn to Kearney’s (1996) understanding of “peasant” differentiation with two notable twists. Kearney notes that “peasant” differentiation cannot be just understood in terms of production and consumption of “value” within a bounded locality. Analysis must recognize that the “peasants” inhabit and participate in a transnational space (also see Roger Rouse 2002). Second, Kearney observes that the analysis of differentiation must not simply define the subject’s location in terms of his/her position in the relations of production and consumption of economic value or cultural signs. It should also explore the internal differentiation that results within the subject who produces and consumes. Thus, the analysis of internal differentiation of the villagers and the “peasantry” must highlight the complex constitution of the “peasant” rather than understanding

the “peasant” simplistically as found in the unilinear narratives of Lenin (1899) and Chayanov (1966), which inform the Marxist state, and is also found in communitarian narratives of the Subaltern school (see Guha 1983, Chatterjee 1993) that inform the activists.

By foregrounding internal differentiation within the “peasantry,” Kearney also questions the land analytic of conceptualizing the “peasantry.” He notes that the unique quality of the “peasant” that makes it a distinctive rural type, in anthropological literature on “peasants,” is a special cognition of “land” as not only a physical but a special primary value from which other social, cultural or economic value are produced, such that from it the “peasant” is able to construct his or her physical, cultural, and social identity. This special relationship of the “peasant” to land, based on an idea that the “peasant” provides for himself or herself his/her own food is the key characteristic that distinguishes the ideal “peasant” from the ideal “non-peasant.” The latter, if he/she is a “farmer,” produces value from land, but that value is exchange value that is consumed by the proletariat and other non-“peasant” groups. This oppositional understanding of value—use and exchange value—is the core of many other dualisms in conventional political economy, Kearney asserts. The dualisms are “peasant-non-peasant,” rural-urban, and subaltern-dominant. It is because of such dualisms, Kearney notes, that students of resistance have focused on resistance of the “peasants” against their class superiors, such as landlords and the state.

However, they have failed, Kearney says, to address the intense competition and struggles within “the peasantry.”

Kearney proposes a shift from a dualistic model of studying peasant politics to a multidimensional field of social practice with sharp attention to internal differentiation within the peasantry in form of complex configuration of personal identity or self-understanding or subjectivity of various groups. A multidimensional field also helps us to go beyond the dichotomy of use and exchange value and treat value in general at particular sites. Thus, I argue that the importance of land must be understood not as use value (which the activists tend to do) or exchange value (which the state in my case tends to do by only offering monetary compensation). Land gets its value and meaning in my field site, I argue, from internal differentiation within the “peasantry” whom I prefer to call villagers and small landholders.

Land is a marker of prestige, influence, and security. Money earned by selling land also serves as dowry for daughters, creates the ability to employ the labor of landless villagers, and may be an object of dispute between brothers, neighbors and families as well as local members of political parties. The speculative value of land, dependent on industrialization and urbanization, also plays a part in rural social relationships and distinctions. In short, possession of land is the core of the subjective identity that leads small landholding groups to desire development, urban and non-farm employment. However, industries, development and urbanization also require land. This is the basic contradiction

that my dissertation explores. It is by exploring this contradiction that I hope to explain the paradoxes that I have laid out in the beginning.

If we go beyond a dualistic model of understanding, as Kearny proposes, we can resolve the second paradox about protests and counter-protests and see protest politics in a new light. The protests over siting the Tata factory in Singur was not anti-modernization or anti-globalization or anti-industrialization and not even anti-neoliberal, nor was it in defense of community and agrarian tradition as many Post-Developmentalist urban activists and academic Marxists, such as Perry Anderson (2007) thought. The politics of protesting the Tata factory was much more complex. From the local perspective, it was about getting better access to the benefits of modernization, globalization, and industrialization so that one can have both land and non-farm employment. This contradiction is nothing new and has been a part of India's and many other countries' experiences with development. The villagers across India, who have benefited from agricultural improvements, could not have done so without the building of dams that displaced many people (Kingelsmith 2001). Therefore, in order to understand the protests, counter-protests and contradictions between public faces of the protest and private opinions of the villagers one must explore the complex self-understandings of the villagers.

During my field stay and observation of protest events and interviews with protesting and other villagers, the only thing that everybody seemed to agree on was that industries are needed. While some said the industries should

come up in the places that are “suitable” for industries, not on fertile agricultural land, others were suspicious of the intention of the Left government that, according to them, has engaged in labor activism to shut down industries in earlier decades. Thus, the question closely related to the one that I raised in the beginning of this introduction is: Why is there this demand for non-farm employment? One may argue that the demand for non-farm employment is an impact of dwindling sizes of landholding, but my proposition in this dissertation is that demand or desire for non-farm employment is discursively produced at particular sites and is generated by the desire for improvement, which seeks both non-farm employment and land.

Objective factors, such as dwindling size of landholding, work through certain subjective registers and desires. Education of this desire (Stoler 1995) may take place through outside agencies and “trustees,” as Tania Li (2007: 7) says, but it is also produced in particular sites through an interaction between internal and external processes; often local idioms and expressions of difference and hierarchy take up material and symbolic influences generated outside the locale. The government and ruling regime overstated or over-read this desire, and the urban intellectual activists tried to absolutely deny it. The consequence was the protest against land acquisition and the counter-protest to bring back the Nano factory.

If we explore the self-understanding of the villagers and their feelings about land in terms of a social field shaped by an improvement discourse and also by transnational processes, we can avoid any kind of extreme positions

regarding villagers or “the peasants” as anti-developmental or pro-developmental. Steering clear of such extreme positions is the key to the reconceptualization of the categories, “peasantry” or “peasants,” which has been subject to much romanticization. Such romanticization also must be avoided in order to unite and scale up the many isolated struggles against big capitalists and corporations. Attempts to address the problems of capitalism in one place or site may only end up enhancing the power and influence of big capitalists. Next, I lay out what I mean by social field.

Social Field

I see the social field as a set of historically formed relations, positions and identities. These positions stand in relationships not only of domination and subordination but also of equivalence to each other by virtue of the access they afford to the goods or resources that are at stake in the field such as land, housing, non-farm employment, access to cheap labor, subsidies, political connections, and so on. The positions give rise to self-understandings and subjectivities that shape expectations based on moral¹⁰ and citizenship claims. Thus, these positions also give rise to identities that are being constantly negotiated within a relational arena. While place and locality can be sources of identity, differentiation within villages also produces identities based on self-

¹⁰ By moral, I mean non-juridical and non-legal claims. For example, desire for non-farm employment is not always expressed in terms of citizenship rights, but the regime is held morally responsible for creating employment.

understandings informed by an improvement discourse. Such identities often take local groups as points of reference. Some local groups or individuals may use schemes of improvement and its closeness to political parties to acquire social power, secure development benefits and government employment, and thereby produce more cosmopolitan identities or positions vis-à-vis others less powerful than they.

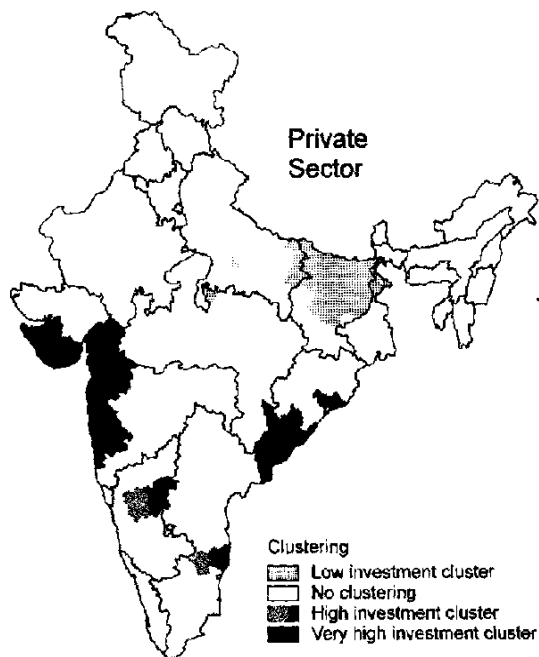
However, this social field in the West Bengali villages must be understood in terms of the broader political and economic situation of India. I will call the latter the political geography of investments in India. The political geography is a composite effect of central government policies (Chakravarty and Lall 2007) and relations between the central government and the provinces (Sinha 2005). One self-sustaining outcome of this geography has been making certain regions in India less attractive for private investors. The Freight equalization Policy of 1956 equalized the prices for essential items such as coal, steel, and cement nationwide. This effectively negated the location based advantages of regions that were rich in these resources and placed them at a disadvantage relative to regions that produced non-essential items whose prices were not equalized. The affected areas were southern Bihar, western Orissa and eastern Madhya Pradesh and also West Bengal (see Chakravarty and Lall 2007: 207). The Freight Equalization policy has been discontinued since the early 1990's, but the damage may already have been done. In the post-liberalization period when private investment became the key to industrialization, West Bengal was less successful

in attracting investments because of the “investor-unfriendly” attitude of the West Bengal’s Marxist government, which led to an inability to deliver incentives, such as cheap land and other infrastructures to private investors on time (see Sinha 2005:225).

Thus, the lesser industrialization of West Bengal in particular and the Eastern region of India in general is a typical case where the possibility of a virtual systematic expulsion from capitalism is in operation. Post-liberalization investment and reform outcomes clearly suggest that the virtual landscape of money and investment flows, finance-scapes (Appadurai, 1996), come into being not simply through inclusion but also through exclusion (see Map 3). The logic of equalization (or inclusion) or evening out is always undercut by a logic of differentiation (exclusion) [Smith 1997]. Decision-making of capitalist investors creates differentiated spaces where some places are sites of sourcing raw materials and labor and others are centers of concentration of investments in infrastructures, technology, and manufacturing industries (Smith 1997).

Manuel Castells (2000: 267) remarked that after the economic crisis of 1990, India went into a new policy of internationalization and liberalization of its economy that induced an economic boom around areas such as Ahmedabad, Bombay, Bangalore, and New Delhi. However, economic “quasi-stagnation” continues around major metropolitan centers such as Calcutta. The subjective experience of such spatial division and expulsion has been most tellingly expressed by James Ferguson (2002) in terms of the word “disconnect” (141).

Disconnection, like abjection, implies an active relation, and the state of having been disconnected requires to be understood as the product of specific structures and processes of disconnection. While the new world order insistently presents itself as a phenomenon of pure connection, disconnection is an integral part of this order, comments Ferguson (2002). The West Bengal province has seen its industries decline so much in the post independence years that the specter of this “disconnect” is part of the lived reality and self-understanding of the people in rural and urban areas alike. The Marxist regime is mostly held responsible for this “disconnect.” The effect of this disconnect is explored in the second chapter.



Map 4. Clustering of private investments in India in the Post-Liberalization (1990) period
Data Source: Center for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)

A Short Note on the Conceptualization of the State

I want to add a short note on the theoretical framework that I use to understand the work of the regime and the state and the people's relationship with the state. The state can be understood from two different perspectives. First, the state can be studied from the point of view of administrative practices and how the administrative processes and practices are perceived and influenced by the citizens. Second, a structuralist way of understanding the state is to see the state as a unitary coherent actor with its own volition and logic (associated with James Scott's [1998] "Seeing Like the State"). According to the first view, there is no *a priori* coherent idea of the state but the idea of the state emerges out of particular administrative practices. This is a processual view of the state as opposed to structuralist view. This analytic of governmental or administrative practices, as used by Ong (2006) and Li (2007), is useful in understanding, as I have already shown, the actions of the regimes that tend to adopt practices that contradict their ideological moorings. In my field site the state is perceived by villagers in terms of practices of the regime or administrative practices that they encounter in their daily lives. However, villagers also talk about the state as a unitary actor when they talk about or complain about policies of the state. Therefore, although I use Ong and Li's approach to the understanding of the state, I do not reject the second view. Hence, I take Hansen and Stepputat's suggestion that the structural and processual views of the state cannot be reconciled completely and must be kept

at productive tension (2003: 4). We cannot, also, abandon the idea of the state as a unitary coherent actor because the neoliberal industrial policies use precisely that imaginary of the state to make provinces compete among each other for investments. This imaginary is also shared by a cross-section of the population. While the urban middle class is more drawn to such ideas of the provincial state as unitary actor, villagers are also not outside the discourse of the state, which sees the state as a unitary actor responsible for the industrialization of the province and comparison among provinces in terms of industrialization pervade the village talk on the state and the regime. The small-land holding villagers who employ laborers on their fields usually criticize the state and the regime for organizing trade-unions in factories and thereby making the province industrially “backward.” Thus, the discourse about “provincial entrepreneurialism” (provinces vying for investments) is co-produced by the media, the regime, and also the villagers within a framework of territorially-based citizenship rights.

Hence, when it comes to theorizing the state, I use both Foucauldian approaches and also the James Scott’s perspective on the state. The former help me conceptualize the nuances of the social field and political practices of the regime. The latter helps me account for the broader political economic context of rise of the entrepreneurial provincial states in India. Both perspectives are useful in understanding how the actors in my field impute agency to the regime. The local word for the state or the government is *sarkar*. The word *sarkar* is sometimes

used to refer to the regime as *bam sarkar* (as Left Front Government). Sometimes it is used to refer to the local government or bureaucrats or members of the ruling party, but it is also used to refer to the provincial state as a unitary entity.

The following timeline of events summarizes the above and provides a sketch of the protests and subsequent events, to the end of 2008, at which time the Tata Nano factory was scheduled to be built elsewhere and villagers protested the loss of the faculty in Singur.

2006

May 18: Tata group chairman Ratan Tata announces small car project at Singur, 40 km from Kolkata, on the day when Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was sworn in as the state's chief minister.

May 25: Angry demonstrations by farmers. Government proposes to discuss the issue with the opposition, but the opposition and the activists refuse to join the discussion.

Sep 25: Government starts distributing compensation checks (12,000). A substantial section (around 5,000 landholders) accepts checks. Many small landholders do not accept for various reasons.

Oct 27: Save Narmada activist Medha Patkar holds meeting in Singur. Raises the issue of livelihood loss and says that compensation or rehabilitation cannot enough for loss of livelihood.

Dec 2: Singur on boil as hundreds of farmers join protests, even as Patkar is arrested by state police. Land acquisition process is complete. Government claims that most of the landowners have accepted checks. Opposition parties and activists contest the claim. Out of the required 997 acres, payments had been made for 635 acres of land to 9020 land title holders.

March 9: Tata and state government ink Singur land deal lease. Building of factory starts. However, protest goes on.

2007

Protests continued and factory was being built

2008

Jan 10: Tata group unveil name for small car, say Nano will cost Rs.100,000/\$2,500, excluding taxes. Singur protesters burn Nano replica.

Jan 18: Calcutta High Court says Singur land acquisition legal.

May 13: Supreme Court refuses to block roll out of Nano from Singur. However, protests go on and opposition party and the activists demand returning of 300 acres of land.

Aug 22: For the first time, Ratan Tata says Nano will move out of West Bengal if violence at Singur persists.

Aug 23: Several states, including Haryana and Maharashtra, ask Tatas to relocate Nano factory to their territories.

Sep 14: The state government offers fresh compensation package for farmers, which was rejected by the Triamool Congress and other activist organizations.

Sep 18: Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa offers the Tatas 1,000 acres in the Dharwad region. Other provinces in India also offer Tata Motors land to set up factory

Oct 3: Tatas declare withdrawal of Nano project.

Oct 7: Ratan Tata and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi announce Sanand, 30 kilometres from Ahmedabad, as the new site.

Oct 15. Counter protests start. Five thousand villagers from Singur travel to Calcutta to demonstrate in order bring Tata Motors back.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation aims to contribute to the anthropological understanding of rural societies, globalization, and development. Through an ethnographic exploration of rural society in West Bengal and the protests against industrialization and land acquisition, this dissertation shows the complexity of rural identity formation in the context of globalization in South Asia. In addition to this introductory chapter, I have written five chapters and a conclusion. The second chapter discusses my research methods and experiences in the field site. The third chapter traces the emergence of the category of peasant in Left politics in West Bengal. The chapter tracks down the historical and political context in which the category, “peasant,” became significant in West Bengal politics. Although “the peasant” as a category has a longer history that can be traced back

to nationalist politics and writings in India but for the argument presented in this dissertation, I have only discussed the trajectory of the category, “the peasant,” in post-independence years in Left politics in West Bengal.

The idea of “peasant” was crucial to Left politicians and thinkers in India for several reasons. First, the category, “peasant,” was used by the Left politicians to represent the rural people, who they thought were not going to benefit from the Nehruvian economic model pursued by the Congress party. Second, the formidable problem the Left politicians encountered in the rural areas of West Bengal and also in Kerala was that they found it very difficult to represent the interests of two distinct groups dependent on land and agriculture – the small landholder and the landless laborers.

As I will show in the third chapter, the word, “peasant,” or the category, “peasant” or “*krishak*,” was used to misrecognize the differences between the small landholders and the landless laborers. The land redistributive policies benefited the small landholders the most. Nonetheless, the land distribution and political and social changes brought about through the Green revolution and Left politics changed the subjectivities of the small landholding groups in West Bengal. Also, as a result of vast increase in village primary schools after independence and the Left Front’s coming to power, many elements of urban lifestyles, such as literacy pursuits and political Leftism, blended with the peasant/cultivator ways of living.

Literacy in the extended sense of knowledge of poetry, drama, and Tagore songs became a fundamental ingredient in peasant/cultivator lifestyle. Being educated and cultured took a double meaning. It meant cultivating an ethic of non-manual or at least non-agricultural work, but it also meant a certain fetishization of “peasant” or “*chashi*” ways of life. The *chashi* identity among the small landholder I will show had enormous political implications in terms of claims the small landholder could make on the state at the local and provincial level. Thus, an implicit understanding (non-juridical) between the state or the regime and the small landholder or *chashi*-s developed. I will further develop this idea of implicit understanding in the next chapter.

The fourth chapter examines the meanings and significances that land has for the small landholders in Singur. In analyzing the meanings of land, this chapter tries to go beyond a productionist understanding of land-based subjectivities. In this chapter, I contend that ownership of land is also a marker of social position and status in the villages no matter how small one’s plot size is. Subjectivities arise out of ownership of land desire, development, non-farm employment, and urbanization, but at the same, small landholding individuals are reluctant to give up land for the latter processes. This chapter examines the contradiction in the villagers’ subjectivities. The contradiction, I claim, can be best understood in terms of an implicit understanding between the small landholders and the regime. Here, by “understanding,” I refer to two meanings of the word “understanding.” The word understanding means both knowing

and also an implicit deal or agreement. The relationship between the regime and the small landholders is based on an implicit agreement that small landholders must be favored as group in case of implementation of land reform programs, updating of land records and agricultural subsidies. The expectations that small landholders have and claims that they make on the state regarding non-farm employment is based on this implicit agreement. However, this implicit agreement has grown out of how the small landholders see themselves as developed subjects and also as deserving more development or "*unnati*." The small landholders' ideas of good and bad and justified and unjustified state action are based on the latter self-understandings and self-image that they have of themselves. The acquisition of land and building of the factory disturbs that self-understanding but it also seems justified because factories and non-farm employment are also considered "developed" state of affairs.

The fifth chapter examines the village protests as performances. The chapter uses Goffman's idea of performance that is built on concepts of a front-stage and a backstage. I show how the small landholding protesting villagers would represent themselves and the rural life to the urban media using the rhetoric of the peasant and harmonious rural life. In doing so, the villagers would suppress the contradiction among themselves and also within themselves. The images of themselves that villagers would construct are products of Left politics and its extolling of rural life and the "peasantry." The protest tactics and

images would challenge the hegemony of the Marxist party, but it would also create conflicts among villagers, and it would stop the protestors from entering into any dialogue with the government regarding compensation and rehabilitation.

The sixth chapter shows how urban activists tend to construct an authentic voice of the peasants to make connections with a transnational civil society that has its own agendas, views implicit or explicit interests. The construction of such authentic voice depends on strategies of erasing differences within villages. These strategies to seek social justice lead to closure and exclusion of many poor and non-poor and even protesting villagers themselves who stood to gain from the building of the factory in different ways. Therefore, the chapter also suggests that in order to form an inclusive movement and in order to bring various isolated movements for social justice together, the urban activists, leftists, or Post-Developmentalists have a very important role to play. However, they must confront the complexities among people whom they seek to represent, and anthropological writings on ethnography have an important contribution in this respect. Moreover, struggle or resistance at one site or scale will rather contribute to the continuing hegemony of capital or capitalism than challenging it, which I strongly believe should be the goal of politics of emancipation.

Chapter 2: Research Methods and Experiences.

A Brief History of My Research in West Bengal

A detour rather than a well chalked out research plan had taken me to the villages of Singur. In 2006, when I reached Calcutta for my dissertation field work, I had planned to look at changes brought about by shrimp cultivation in the West Bengali districts south of Calcutta. My pre-dissertation research also focused on shrimp cultivation in these districts. During my research in these districts in the years 2003 and 2004, I found that huge amount of paddy land had been converted into shrimp farms. During my interviews with the landless villagers in the shrimp cultivation districts, many landless villagers complained that due to conversion of land, they did not get enough employment in their villages as they would usually get during the paddy cultivation season.

Many of the landless, as they said, had to migrate out of their villages. One landless villager also said that they had organized a protest against shrimp cultivation in their village and had gone to the local authorities. However, their complaints were not considered because the small landholding villagers were enthusiastically converting their land into shrimp farms or leasing their land out to individuals interested in setting up shrimp farms or brick factories. The small landholders in these villages would say that their land was not good enough and paddy cultivation was not profitable so they had been converting their land into shrimp farms. Thus, the changing landscape of these shrimp-cultivating villages revealed to me the differences within rural West Bengal and how agrarian

change was taking place not simply because of the policies of the state government that promoted shrimp cultivation but also because of the urge of small landowning villagers who thought shrimp cultivation would turn them into small entrepreneurs.

The first thing that I did in 2006 was to get in touch with an activist friend of mine in order to find out whether he knew anything about the politics of shrimp cultivation in the districts that I had already visited. The activist friend of mine informed me about the brewing up of discontent in Singur. As I already knew about the protests, I accompanied him during one of his visits to villages in Singur. However, I was also drawn to the Singur villages because the names of the villages sounded as if they are shrimp cultivating villages. The names of the villages were *Khaser-bheri*, *Singher-bheri*, *Bera-bheri* and so on. *Bheri* in Bengali means swampy land and land that is suitable for shrimp cultivation. The question that I had in mind during my initial visits was: Why were the protests in Singur so well-publicized while the news of the protests among the landless villagers in the shrimp cultivating villages never reached the city.

As I visited the Singur villages with the activist friend of mine, I was initially perceived by some villagers as an activist. Later, when I visited alone, some villagers thought that I was a journalist. However, all that changed when I started staying in Singur villages. Villagers would have difficulty in classifying me as an activist or as a journalist because individuals belonging to these categories would rarely stay in the villages for months. Nonetheless, most of the

small landholding villagers thought that I belonged to one of the left-activist groups. The usual question that I encountered was, “What is the name of your organization or group.” I would, however, introduce myself as a Ph.D. student interested in rural politics. My status as student would make many villagers wonder how I afforded to spend so much time in the villages without any worries of working at a job and earning money. Some villagers would think that my father has lot of money to sponsor my stay in the villages. Others who guessed that I have a scholarship would repeatedly ask me about my monthly salary or stipend. Many young villagers would ask me if I could arrange for permanent employment for them in the city.

During my stay in Singur, I had many hosts. While Pareshnath Kolay, (pseudonyms)¹¹ a village school teacher and a small landholder, was my host for first six months, Manik (pseudonym), a young person of a small landholding family had put me up in his room for four months. While I stayed in their houses, I would have my meals in other households. My meals at various households would give me an idea of the economic condition of the household. While in Pareshnath Kolay’s and Manik’s house, the lunch and dinner would be very sumptuous with rice, vegetables, meat and fish. Mukta (pseudonym), a near landless villager who owned a tea-shop close to the highway, would offer a very basic lunch with more rice. Pareshnath Kolay and Manik would try to control with whom I talked and also how I interpreted my interviews and my

¹¹ All names of villagers that appear in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

interactions with other villagers. Mukta would give me different perspectives about the situation and ask me to talk to individuals not suggested by Pareshnath Kolay and Manik.

I was also a spectator to many debates that Manik and Kalyan (both belonged to small landholding households) had with Mukta. Mukta told them, "See, I do not have any party. Whoever gives me work and employment, I am in that party. " Manik and Kalyan, however, asked me to tell Mukta not to act like an opportunist and leave the job that he had taken up at factory-site. Thus, my position in the village and among the different kinds of villagers whom I got to know very closely became that of a person whose opinion on difficult questions would matter. My strategy was not to pass any conclusive statement about land acquisition or industrialization. I rather used the opportunity to ask probing questions to all three of them and others whom I interviewed.

Gradually, the small landholding and near landless villagers came to treat me as a quasi-insider in their villages. Manik often accompanied me to other villages where I would interview the landless villagers of the *majur* group. My interviews with the *majurs* were always interrupted by a local small landholder individual who appeared to think that the *majurs* could not present themselves in the right way in front of an urban individual like me. Manik advised me not to visit the "underdeveloped" areas of the villages where the landless groups lived. However, there were distinct advantages in being an insider because the leaders of the protest movement would introduce me to other leaders and activists as

someone who almost belongs to the village and say “he has been with us since the beginning.”

Research Methods

My research is based on seventeen months of fieldwork that I conducted in Singur, Hooghly district in West Bengal, India over the course of two years. During that time, I also visited Calcutta intermittently to interview NGO (non-governmental organization) activists, student activists, and politicians of various political parties. I also visited other sites close to Calcutta, such as Rajarhat, where land was acquired to expand the city. My research entailed a multi-pronged methodological approach relying on informal and semi-structured interviews, basic surveys, life-history interviews, discourse analysis, and archival work. Moreover, a multi-level approach of intensive participation observation was crucial for obtaining qualitative ethnographic information about the villagers, their actions, protests, and livelihood practices. I participated in informal discussions in local tea-shops and grocery shops. I went to the agricultural field with small landholding supervisory farmers. I also accompanied my friends and hosts in the villages to market places. I would also go with them when they would visit the nearby towns and cities for employment and other needs.

Throughout the dissertation I have used pseudonyms of my respondents to protect their identities. I have also used pseudonyms for NGO workers and student-activists whom I interviewed. Chapter four uses real names of activists

who wrote about Singur. As their publications and the documentary that I discuss are already in the public domain, I do not use pseudonyms.

Participant Observation

In my research, participant observation played a very key role. I would spend hours sitting close to agricultural fields or at the tea-shops listening and observing individuals from various backgrounds. As villagers sometimes took me to be a journalist, they would not mind when I would take notes. Sometimes, during friendly debates and discussions, certain villagers would advise me to take down points that they were making. I would also roam about in the villages and visit different spots in order to observe and listen to different kinds of villagers. My observations would often contradict what villagers would say about themselves. While they would say that they are completely dependent on agriculture, I would see many of them leave the village for work outside the village at 10 or 11 am in the morning. It is by observing the small landholding villagers that I got to know what they mean when they say they are going to farm. Going to farm for most of the small landholding individuals was to go and supervise the day laborers in the field. Participant observation was crucial to understand the relationship between the small landholders who called themselves *chasi* and the landless laborers or *majurs*. In the presence of the small landholding villagers, the *majur* would rarely sit on the benches. They would mostly squat on the ground.

I would also observe that the daily wage was negotiated between the small landholders and the day-laborers. In the body language of the interaction between the small landholders and the day laborers, I would see the patronizing and condescending attitude of small landholders towards the day-laborers. The small landholders would say that it is because of them that day laborers get work. The small landholding villagers' idea about cleanliness was revealed to me through observation because I would never see small landholding villagers dipping their hands in the muddy water where jute was soaked before the fiber was peeled out of the plant. I would also observe how brothers reacted differently to the question of land acquisition. During my sessions at the tea shop, I would observe brothers debating about land. The tea-shop discussions also exposed me to the political factions within the villages.

Open-ended and Life History Interviews

In order to elicit information about how people thought about land and industrialization, I conducted long open-ended interviews. The long open-ended interviews were often set in the multiple gatherings of villagers who would visit. I would develop rapport with one or two villagers in each gathering and would accompany them to their houses to ask them about them and their views regarding the village, politics, and industries. Over the course of seventeen months, I could interview members of 70 small landholding households and 10 landless laborers in Gopalnagar, Bajemelia and Beraberi villages. The small

landholding households mostly owned less than 4 acres (12 *bighas*) of land. A household with more than 9 *bighas* (3 acres) is locally considered to be wealthy. I did not conduct any formal survey but in course of my interviews and interactions, I found out about the landholding size of the households and about the number of members who stayed and worked outside the province. I also recorded number of members in each household. I present the data in a table in the chapter “Meanings of Land.” It was during the open-ended interviews that I could identify the contradictions in the villagers’ subjectivities regarding their feelings about land. The open-ended interviews would also help me to gather data on the relationship between the villagers’ personal histories and broader political economic forces such as decline of industries, land redistribution, and dwindling sizes of landholding. I also interviewed local small entrepreneurs who supplied materials to the Tata factory, workers in the non-governmental organizations and urban activists in the city of Calcutta, the capital city of West Bengal.

Discourse Analysis of Archival Materials

I collected policy papers and activist literature on the protests to analyze what the state government thought about the villages and also how the urban activists viewed the villages and villagers. The activist literature includes the brochures of non-governmental organizations and also booklets published by independent left activists who wrote about their experiences in the villages. I also

collected documentary films made by the activists. In the fourth chapter, I have focused on the word and texts produced and written by the activists. The analysis of documentaries, activist articles, and brochures helped me to show how an authentic image of the rural environment and voice of the villagers were constructed.

Census and Statistical Data

I used the census data to get information about the landholding size in the Singur block. Census data also shows the percentage of village population employed in agricultural and non-agricultural work. However, while classifying the population of a block¹² according to occupations, the census data does not report in terms of landholding size. The broad categories in which it classifies the occupation data are cultivators, agricultural laborers, household industry workers, and other workers. The census data does not say how it distinguishes between cultivators and the agricultural laborers. My experiences in the field site show that the cultivators are the small landholding households. There have also been criticisms regarding how the census data is collected in the villages. According to sociologist Dipankar Gupta (2006), dependence on agriculture is over-reported in the census data. I have also used statistical data collected by other government agencies such as the Confederation of Indian Industries. The

¹² Block is an administrative unit below the district-level. Districts are like Counties in the United States.

census data and statistical data help me to put my ethnographic data in a broader demographic and socio-economic context of West Bengal province.

Chapter 3: “The Peasant” and the Present¹³ History of West Bengal

In the introductory chapter, I argued that improvement discourse not only shapes particular regimes or governments but also the subjectivities and self-understandings of the villagers by giving new significances to already existing differences within the rural population. It is this discourse of improvement in conjunction with democracy and land reforms and transnational influences that shape the social field of distinctions, relationships, and self-understandings in the villages of West Bengal. The common theme that connects the dominant practices of government and the practices of government that make exceptions, I claimed is the discourse on “improvement.” Exploring this connection, I argued is crucial to explain why actions of the Marxist regime seem both arbitrary and natural to the villagers as reflected in protests and counter-protests.

In this chapter, I will show that improvement discourse is not simply an elite discourse but is also used by small landholding section of West Bengali peasantry to distinguish itself from the landless laborers. The chapter will also show how the small and supervisory landholders’ sense of entitlement to their land was generated and maintained by cultivating a “developed” *chashi* (or farmer/peasant) identity. In the process, they emerged as the backbone of Marxist politics in West Bengal and deprived the landless groups, whom the small landholders called “underdeveloped” *majurs* or laborers, from having

¹³ Present, a (adv.) 1. Being in the place considered or mentioned; that is here (or there) b. Existing in the thing, class, or case mentioned or under consideration; not wanting; ‘found’. Opposite of absent. 2. That is actually being dealt with written, discussed or considered.. 3. Of which one is conscious; directly thought of remembered, or imagined. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

proper rights or access to land. The cultivation of the *chashi* identity was based on dispersion of urban and elite ideas of progress and improvement through Left politics.

This chapter looks at the significance and implication of the category, “the peasant,” for Left politics in India and especially in West Bengal. The chapter tracks the historical and political context in which the category--“peasant”--emerged as a term charged with particular meaning. The chapter examines the political challenges that Left politicians and activists encountered when they looked at post-colonial India’s rural social landscape through the lens of the Marxist understanding of the role of “the peasantry.” This chapter also shows how expediencies of democratic electoral politics and an urge to find acceptance among rural groups led the Left politicians and activists in India to constantly revise their idea of “the peasant.”

I begin by showing how the usage of the term peasant and its Bengali synonyms tends to both reveal and hide the complexities of rural social reality. Next, I discuss very briefly the historical background in which Left politics gained prominence in India. The third section lays out the complexity of agrarian structure in south West Bengal that early Left politicians and activists encountered. The fourth section discusses the debates and discussions regarding “the peasants” among the Left politicians. The fifth section shows how the cultural changes that occurred in West Bengali villages with the rise of Left politics and subsequent implementation of land redistribution and

decentralization programs gave rise to a particular kind of self-understanding among the small landholding villagers that valued progress and development.

“The Peasant” and Its Bengali Synonyms

Before I begin to lay out the context for the usage of the term “peasant,” I must provide information on the caste system in West Bengal and then note that the many Bengali words that can be translated as “the peasant” or “the farmer.”

The small landholding villagers mostly belong to *Mahisya* and *Goala* castes. In the wider caste hierarchy of Bengal, *Mahisyas* and *Goals* come after three upper castes, *Brahman*, *Baidya* and *Kayastha*. However, neither the *Mahisyas* nor the *Goalas* are classified as scheduled castes, i.e. as disadvantaged groups eligible for affirmative action. *Mahisyas* and *Goalas* in the Singur villages consider themselves as “general castes” and think of themselves as superior to the *majur* who usually belong to castes lower than the *Mahisyas* and *Goalas*. The castes to which the laborers belong are numerous, such as *Bagdi*, *Dom*, and *Ruidas*. Thus, the caste difference and economic difference between the small landholder and the landless laborers or *majurs* overlap. The *Mahisya* and *Goala* individuals can be identified by the surnames. The usual *Mahisya* surnames are Kolay, Panja, Sau, Khanra, Dhara, Pakhira, and Das. The *Goalas* usually go by the surname Ghose.

In the pre-land reform years, the Brahmans and Kayasthas landowners owned most of the land in the villages. In the post-land reform years, the power in the villages shifted from the *Brahman* and *Kayasthas* to the *Mahisyas* and *Goalas*.

The *Mahisyas* and *Goalas* are also collectively called the middle castes because of their social position between the *Brahman* and *Kayasthas* and the absolutely lowest caste in West Bengal. The composition of this middle section, however, varies across the districts of West Bengal. The *Mahisyas* and *Goalas* numerically pre-dominate Hooghly district where my field site is located. In other districts, one finds other castes, such as *Aguris* or even *Santhals* occupying the middle position. The middle caste individuals and households were the primary beneficiaries of the land redistribution and therefore the small landholding groups are comprised of middle caste households. However, dwindling landholding size and subdivision of plot have made many small landholding families near landless. The near landless households usually own very tiny plots. Next, I will note the multiple Bengali synonyms for the term peasant.

The Bengali words for “the peasant” or “the farmer” are “*Krishak*,” “*Chasi*,” “*Chasa*,” and “*Kisan*.” Etymologically, the word *krishak* can be distinguished from *chasi* because the former refers to a tiller and the latter means a farmer. However, such etymological distinctions hardly guide the usage of the terms in colloquial or formal Bengali.¹⁴ *Chasi* and *krishak* are used interchangeably to refer to individuals associated with farming. The word *Chasa*, which means “illiterate peasant,” has a derogatory connotation. By contrast, *Chasi* is a respected and well-informed peasant or farmer. *Kisan* in Bengali means agricultural laborers but the word has political significance because “the peasant

¹⁴ Samsad Bengali Dictionary 2005, Sishu Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta

front” of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is called the *Kisan Sabha*.¹⁵ Thus, the word *Kisan*, when used in written Bengali, refers to peasants, who are thought to be cultivators, whether or not they are agricultural laborers.

Moreover, if one considers the agrarian relationships around land and production in their entirety, one also finds many terms for actors who are usually considered “non-peasant” groups living on rent. The landowners, depending on the context, can be called *zamindars* or *jotedars*. *Jote* means landholding. However, in certain parts of south West Bengal sharecroppers are called *jotedars* (Bose 1999). Nonetheless, as far as the contemporary political vocabulary of West Bengal is concerned, the term *jotedar* means big landowner who is not a peasant. The term *jotedar*, has come to include the wealthy large scale land owning villagers who are opposed to the “peasant’s” interests.

As the policy and party documents of the Marxist party were written in English and Bengali, the words “peasant,” “*krishak*,” and “*chasi*” have been used interchangeably to refer to different kinds of individuals and groups dependent on land and agriculture, who are “non-*jotedars*.” However, such interchangeability has also hidden the key internal differentiations within the groups who are collectively called “the peasant,” “the *krishak*,” or “the *chasi*.”

¹⁵ There are no separate Left organization for agricultural laborers or *majurs*.

Left Politics, Development and the Agrarian Question

The context of the application of Marxist theory and the category of “the peasant” to account for Indian realities was set by three events--- the nationalist movement, introduction of the concept of development by the British colonial state, and Nehruvian emphasis on development-planning. The colonial state’s idea of development saw India as a pre-capitalist geographical region that could be “developed” through its subjugation to a colonial power and intervention of the colonial state (see Gidwani 2007). The nationalist or *swadeshi* view directly opposed the colonial narrative and emphasized autonomy from the clutches of a colonial power and establishment of a modern nation-state (see Bose 1998). Economic policies undertaken by Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, were one expression of the idea that national independence would unleash the potential for India’s progress towards a modern and developed future (Bose 1998).

“Development” came to represent the task of modernizing a backward nation. National economic planning was therefore charged with the work of making the modernization or progress possible. Progress or modernization meant that whole of India must be geared towards the normative agenda of capital accumulation and economic growth that would nourish the “national economy.” The Marxists or the Leftists theoretically differed from the above perspectives by refusing to embrace the “national economy” as the standpoint for the critique of imperialism. Thus, noted Bengali Marxist theoretician M. N.

Roy argued “increase in *national wealth* means the enrichment of the native propertied class and the enrichment of this class means expropriation and pauperization of the producing class” (Roy 1922). The producing class in this remark was rather loosely conceived in terms of an amalgamation of “peasants” and “proletariats.” The “peasantry” and the “proletariats” were thought in terms of actors in a class struggle, at least theoretically, and not as part of a harmonious nation or national organism as was the case during the nationalist movement (see Sartori 2008).

Although the Leftists had disagreements with the liberal-socialist solution for post-colonial India’s myriad problems, they did not have a different solution to offer within the parameters of an electoral democracy. Thus, a search for an identity within the Indian political spectrum remained one of the constant concerns for Left parties. An identity crisis dogged the Left movement in India and West Bengal so much that factionalism became very common among the Leftists. Factionalism based on subtle disagreements over theoretical lines and organizational strategies made leftists a loose and contentious ideological front that could not disavow the promises of development. The emergence of the category of peasant must be understood with respect to the factionalism and infighting among the Left parties in search of an identity and footing in the political scenario of post-independent India. The political scenario was marked by a stark gap between urban elite intellectuals, who mostly formed the

leadership of the Left parties, and the rural population who had to be won over for a revolution or an electoral victory (Franda 1976).

As the early decades of India's independence unfolded, Left intellectuals found themselves stranded between the historical differences of India and the universalizing summons of Marxist theories. The long and sometimes insular debates that consumed Indian academic Marxism from the late 1960's into the early 1980's were symptomatic of this predicament (see Gidwani 2008)¹⁶. Unable to interrupt either the lure of development or pieties of the Left orthodoxy, Marxist intellectuals could only lament the failure of a properly capitalist transformation of agriculture to produce the necessary surplus for industrialization, an initial home market for manufactured goods, and an agricultural proletariat that could participate in a communist revolution. Thus, the question before the Marxists and Leftist politicians was similar to what Karl Kautsky (1899) was asking in the context of Germany. For Kautsky, agricultural and rural small farms presented problems that could not be reconciled in Marxist theory.

For the Indian and Bengali Leftists the problem was to understand the rural reality in terms of Marxian categories of the peasant and the proletariat because a large rural population involved in production and ownership of land and the means of production did not neatly fit into any of the Marxian categories

¹⁶ Debates were mostly about whether Indian rural areas can be classified as feudal or capitalist (see *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1973 January, March, December issues.)

neatly. While the big landlords or *jotedars* could be identified and differentiated very easily from the rest of the village population, problems cropped up in seeking alliance and support from remaining population that was comprised of small landholders and landless laborers. While some thought the landless as the proletariat and therefore a revolutionary class, others did not think of the rural society in terms of such distinctions. The category of “peasant” emerged as a solution to the problem, which worked in both the provinces where the Communist Party of India (Marxist) maintained its electoral success.

The Agrarian Structure of South West Bengal – Historical Sketch

To demonstrate the complexity of land relations, I will refer to well-known historian Sugata Bose’s (1994) work on agrarian relations in colonial Bengal in the post 1860 period. Bose’s main contention has been that agrarian relations differed widely within the Bengal region. He shows that North Bengal had much more unequal distribution of land than in South Bengal. However, from Bose’s essay, the important passage that will help us understand the Marxist agrarian dilemma is the following:

For east Bengal, the *bhadralok-chasi*¹⁷ dichotomy is important and a broad distinction probably sufficient. The bulk of the Muslim and Namasudra cultivators may be seen to have *chasi* or peasant status. They held *jotes* or cultivable lands and owned implements of cultivation and had solid titles to their homesteads, describing themselves as *grihasthi*. In west Bengal, it was not unusual for some of the landlords to direct farming on land that they held as

¹⁷ I discuss the *bhadralok* later.

khas or personal demesne. In addition to the *chasis* of agricultural castes, such as the *Mahisya*, *Sadgopes*, and *Aguris*, there was in west Bengal at the very bottom of the agrarian hierarchy, a distinct layer of landless agricultural laborers drawn from among low-caste *Bagdi*, *Bauri* and aboriginal tribes, such as *Santhals*. In east Bengal, with the intensification of demographic pressure, the ranks of land-poor peasantry swelled after 1920, yet the peasantry here may be seen to merge into the landless category. In west Bengal, a certain discontinuity is apparent; the peasant and rural proletarian there must be regarded as distinct elements in pre-existing rural social structure (284).

In the above passage Bose compares Eastern and Western parts of Bengal.

While the Eastern part of Bengal is now part of Bangladesh after the Partition in 1947, the western part of Bengal is where my field site is located and is also the region very close to urban areas of Bengal. This is also the region where the urban left intellectuals and political activists encountered their agrarian question. Further, while writing about agrarian relationship in Hooghly district in 1914, Bose (1994: 284) says:

In 1914, *Kaibarta* and *Mahisya* families who formed the bulk of the raiyats in Hooghly district employed *Bagdi*, *Bauri*, and *Santhal* sharecroppers and laborers. The classes, peasants and the agricultural laborers, were consequently brought together in a necessary though unequal collaboration in order to sustain agricultural production. It was not unusual for *caste peasants* to lease land from the gentry on *bhag* and employ laborers who were supplied with necessary plough-team and seeds. For west and central Bengal, the vision of self-cultivation by peasant smallholders has to be modified to take account of the fairly widespread use of tied and hired labor not only on the land lord's and rich peasants' considerable *khas* lands but also on peasant smallholdings.

The above quote from Bose gives a complicated picture of the agrarian structure of Bengal in the colonial times. It shows how nebulous was the category of peasant because he identifies the internal differentiation within the

groups that came under the big landlords in the social and economic hierarchy. The account shows that the rural south West Bengal had an agrarian structure with three hierarchically arranged groups—the land owners or landlords, the tenant farmers or small farmers¹⁸, and the agricultural laborers. It is the small farmers or tenant farmers, whom I have identified as small landholders in this dissertation and they mostly belong to *Mahisya* and *Sadgope* or *Goala* castes. In the next section, I will discuss how the communists in West Bengal tackled the rural and the agrarian question beginning in 1950.

The Left Politicians and “the Peasants”

As I noted earlier, the leaders of the Communist Party of India (CPI) were mostly members of an urban elite group called the *Bhadralok* or the “gentle folk.” Professional career choices and educational pursuits marked off the *Bhadraloks* not only from the people of lower status but also from the trading castes and groups. According to Partha Chatterjee (1998), the ethic of the *Bhadralok* middle-class-social respectability was not based on birth or wealth but primarily on education, an ethic that demanded hard work, devotion to learning, professional excellence and a somewhat self-righteous contempt for easy wealth. It was this ethic, undoubtedly elitist, even exclusivist in its own social context, that formed the moral core that gave rise to anti-capitalist radicalism from the late 1930’s and ultimately culminated in the election of a Left government. Thus, it was not

¹⁸ The tenant farmers are also called small farmers (see Bose 1994). Many tenant farmers later got land due to redistribution and thereby became small landholding farmers.

surprising that the Communists initially were much more successful in organizing the urban middle class—middle class trade unions, teachers, students, engineers, and so forth—than they were in organizing the rural population or the factory laborers. The anti-capitalist radicalism, I will add, is also responsible for the romanticized views of the village and the “peasants” of post-developmental and Leftist urban activists.

Perhaps the exclusivist character of the *bhadralok* ethic also imparted a disdain for electoral politics that required the involvement of many low-caste and status people from urban and rural areas. The Communist party did try at times to increase its influence in low-status groups by recruiting more and more of its lower level leadership from among laborers and cultivators. In the 1950’s, it tried to emerge as a truly “mass party by increasing the membership and by embarking on a number of new projects that demanded a larger membership” (Franda 1971:16). However, sooner or later, the state leadership reined in its desire to expand. The reasons they gave were that the expansion would mean less efficiency and perhaps even loss of control by the state and central party committees, and they also disliked the idea of dependence on electoral politics. This feeling was shared by leaders of the Communist Party of India in the 1950’s (Marcus Franda 1971) and still prevails among many Bengali and Indian urban left activists of various shades and hues.

Despite such restrictions on the recruitment of party leaders from non-urban and non-*bhadralok* backgrounds, party movements that involved low-

status groups in West Bengal depended on communication flows between men of high-status groups, usually centered in Calcutta, and many low-status groups spread out all over the province. These communication flows were made possible by a number of intervening brokers consisting of individuals of both high-status groups and low status groups. Many early urban left activists, trained in law, worked as relief workers and trade union leaders fighting court cases for the laborers or poor people. There was also brokerage by tribal, village and caste association leaders who had gone into opposition to the state government when rival low status leaders had been favored with patronage dispensed by the ruling Congress party. Connections were also built by low status and rural individuals who had adopted *bhadrolok* manners and customs and were drawn to Marxism as a sign of their progressive and modern outlook. Thus, in the 50's, the Communist movement started spreading under the control of a leadership with its various frontal mass organizations such as the trade union, the students union and the *Kisan Sabha*, and also constituency level electoral committees.

Tensions between the state elitist Marxist leadership and the frontal organizations and electoral committees¹⁹ led to the first split in the Communist Party of India (CPI)²⁰. The primary strain arose because the state leadership was dominated by the theoreticians and the mass and frontal organizations by

¹⁹ The Communist Party of India had three major organizations or divisions – the electoral front, trade union front, and the peasant front. By frontal organizations, I mean these organizations.

²⁰ For a discussion on Left politics in West Bengal, see Franda (1971), Sen Gupta (1972), Nossiter (1988), and Mallick (1994)

leaders who organized people on the ground. Each of the wings of the party fought with the other over control of the electoral wing and vied for the loyalty and allegiance of the electoral organizations.

This pattern of factional conflict is best illustrated by the debate that had raged among the leaders of the peasant front in West Bengal, the *Kisan Sabha*, over the strategy to be pursued regarding two important rural elements, the small landholders and the landless. Confusion reigned regarding what would be the goal of a Communist “peasant” organization. The communist electoral leaders argued for strategies designed to secure the support of both the landless and the small landholders. However, other members pointed out that a single party cannot realistically appeal to both. Effective organization of landless laborers in rural areas had generally hurt small landholders more than anyone else and had therefore alienated this significant segment of the rural population. On the other hand, party attempts to gain the support of small landholders had usually made it impolitic to organize the landless at the same time, thereby depriving the party of support from a segment of rural population that, many believed, was potentially the most “revolutionary.”²¹ The confusion resulted in two factions within the Communist Party – the Right faction and the Left faction. The Left faction would later emerge as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI (M). The Right faction wanted to woo the small landholders first and,

²¹ Influenced by Marxist theories the landless were seen as the rural proletariat and therefore were thought to be revolutionary (see Franda 1971)

perhaps later the landless, while the Left faction had sought to organize the landless. The members of the electoral organization, however, tried to mediate between the two warring factions to use both the views to make electoral gains.

The debate regarding whom to woo and organize or, put differently, who is the real peasant, continued and chased Left politics in West Bengal. In 1955, when the debate surfaced in the party documents. The Left faction's views prevailed over the Right faction's views. However, soon after and since 1957, the Right faction's views became the official view of the Communist Party. In West Bengal, the Right faction gained a token victory in the peasant front, or the *Kisan Sabha*, over the left Faction, and the peasant front adopted a strategy to court the small landholders. According to Weiner (1968: 210):

The fifteenth provincial conference, meeting in 1957, announced that the *Kisan Sabha* favored compensation for those small intermediaries whose holdings were confiscated by the government. It further declared that the organization would launch agitations for agricultural loans, improved irrigation facilities, manure, education, health and drinking water and would continue agitation against excessive irrigation taxes and other taxes, including a proposed development tax. The *Sabha* also announced that it would work within the existing legislative framework, would take the initiative in forming *panchayats* (local government councils) under the new *Panchayat Act*, and would support credit co-operatives, marketing societies, handicraft cooperatives, and even the government's community development program and national extension service²². In short, *Kisan Sabha* proposed to minimize agitations and maximize benefits peasants (and *Kisan Sabha*) might receive by working within existing legislation, while at the same time putting pressure on the state government for greater rural expenditures. Rural harmony rather than class conflict was the new theme of the West Bengal *Kisan Sabha*. (210)

²² National extension

In spite of an official resolution for harmonious politics in the villages, party activities in the villages remained fragmented and localized. Party members kept on organizing the landless laborers for mass struggles in areas controlled by the Left faction, while harmonious politics was pursued in the districts in which the Right faction dominated. In the districts of 24-Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, and Bardhaman, Communists concentrated on organizing the landless for “mass struggles” against the landed. In Midnapore district, where the Right faction dominated, leaders went for a harmonious politics. The disagreement on the agrarian question and other problems between the left and the Right faction led to a split in the party. The Left faction emerged as the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The Communist Party of India (Marxist), however, comprised not only the Left faction but also the electoralists²³.

The main beneficiaries of the split were the electoral organizations because in the elections, support from the rural landless and the urban poor did very well in the ballot box in many districts. Eventually the electoralists or centrists would come to dominate the CPI (M) and it would pursue electoral goals rather than the revolutionary aims proposed by the Left faction leaders. Thus, the harmonious or consensus politics came to dominate the political strategy of the Marxist party or the CPI (M) that would become the dominant coalition partner of the Left Front (see Franda 1971).

²³ The Left leaders and politicians who were members of or ran the wing of the party geared towards ensuring successes during elections.

However, there was more to the shift in strategy than just electoral expediency. For this we must turn to certain developments in Kerala because the theoretical line that came to dominate in the CPI (M) was formulated by the well-known Marxist theoretician E M S Namboodripad, who became the theoretical brain behind the CPI (M), and the social structure in Kerala was also similar to what it was in western Bengal. Moreover, Kerala elected the first Communist provincial government in India in 1957. The problems faced in Kerala would also have implications for the Marxists in West Bengal where they were elected to power 10 years later in 1967. Moreover, Namboodripad's theories came to dominate the views of Leftist activists. Knowingly or unknowingly, the urban Left and post-developmentalists came to accept Namboodripad's theorization. This is why it is important to discuss Namboodripad's theorization in the context of land redistribution in Kerala.

The Marxist program of redistributive land reforms in Kerala was based on the important Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee. Ironically, the policy model of redistributing land to the landless tillers did not become operative under any Congress regime but was closely approximated by the Communist regime in Kerala. After coming to power, the Communist government in Kerala immediately moved to protect the tenant farmers against eviction from huts in the landlord's land. The newly elected government in Kerala was in a delicate position because it found that it must carry out radical

land reform within the constitutional framework of India, and the implementing agencies were an elitist bureaucracy and a court system.

Moreover, the landlords constituted a powerful group who virulently opposed the move, and the Left members in the assembly outnumbered their adversary Congress party by only two candidates. Therefore, the regime proceeded with the modest aim of implementing land reforms that the Congress regime had promised but never effectively put into practice. Thus, Namboodripad wrote that reform details must be left to the “innate, revolutionary common sense of the peasants themselves, organized in their own associations and committees” (Namboodripad 1952: 171)). The reform policy bill set the parameters of the reform but provided for popular participation in adjusting implementation to local conditions.

The parameters encompassed major demands of the party’s peasant organization but went beyond those demands in important respects (Herring 1983).²⁴ The bill ensured the fixity of tenure for a wide variety of holders of tenancy-like rights in land, and a ceiling or a upper limit was put on landholding size of the landowners. Ceiling surplus land was redistributed among the landless and small landholders. The bill and its implementation also established the fair rent that sharecroppers were required to pay to the landholders based on the kind of land that they cultivated. After fair rents had been established and fixity of tenure was conferred, there was a “Peasants’ Day” on which all

²⁴ For discussion on Land reforms in Kerala see Herring 1983.

cultivating tenants were considered to have purchased their holdings, extinguishing the landlords and intermediaries rights in the excess land that they held beyond the stipulated ceiling. Rights to these ceiling surplus lands were vested in the government (see Ronald Herring 1983).

Effective implementation of land reforms policy would abolish rentier landlordism. However, it was not clear whether the land went to the tiller. It was also not clear whether the tiller was the peasant to which Namboodripad was referring when he thought about the “innate, revolutionary common sense of the peasant.” The bill said that cultivating tenants were to be made owners, but cultivating was defined to include supervision of hired labor. The finance minister, C Achutha Menon (1958: 65), wrote in his commentary on the bill:

If the slogan, “Land to the tiller” is to have any meaning, it is the person who actually cultivates the land either with his own labor or the labor of members of his family who ought to get the benefit of land legislation. We have extended this a little and also included a person who personally supervises cultivation, although not doing actual manual labor, because we thought it was necessary in the interest of production to encourage such people also.

However, the “theoretical” explanation came from Namboodripad, who spelled out the “correct” tactical line in the socio-historical context understood within Marxian evolutionary framework. Namboodripad said that the correct thing to do would be to attack the feudalism in the rural areas. Thus, the person who took the risk of cultivation would also be considered as a peasant and could

benefit from land reform. Namboodripad (1952: 72) considered the distinction between “parasitic” feudal landlords and entrepreneurial capitalist landlords critical and argued that the former had to be destroyed, the latter encouraged: “capitalism in agriculture, like capitalism in industry, is an advance on the present situation in a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country” (Namboodripad 1952: 102).

Thus in Kerala, gradually the idea of radical and revolutionary peasantry gave in to the logic of good landlords, bad landlords, parasites, and entrepreneurs. The logic is also evident in the fact that ceiling on the holdings was rather high, considering the large number of landless agriculturalists. The ceiling was set at 15 acres of double-crop paddy land, 22.5 acres of single-crop land, 15 acres of garden land, and 30 acres of dry land. Concessions were made to small and medium landholders because a large number of them had started joining the party in the countryside. Any radical measures would threaten the electoral position and popularity of the Communist Party, which was very crucial to abolish the landlords. Thus, the “peasant” association of the party comprised of members from small and medium landholding groups who were mostly supervisory farmers, and agricultural laborers were marginally represented. However, all these groups were collectively called “the peasants.” Distinctions were made within the groups in terms of rich peasants and poor peasants, but such distinctions never specified who does the actual agricultural work. Namboodripad also noted that after implementing the ceiling on

landholding, meager amount of surplus land that would be available could be distributed equally, but that would result in very tiny economically unviable landholdings.

Ronald Herring (1983), a political scientist who has written extensively on Kerala, notes that the Communist regime eventually created “petit-bourgeois agrarians” (52) through land reform. However, it is difficult to ascertain how much of this creation of “petit bourgeois agrarians” was the well-planned intention of the Communist regime or how much of it was the effect of pressure groups working within the democratic set-up. The Left theoreticians usually identify the big landlord as the main adversary but, it seems, in practice negotiations and compromises with various groups of poor and non-poor groups in the villages resulted in trajectories of change different from what the Leftists had desired. The emergent reality would also give rise to aspirations that would accept and contest the global capitalism in unpredictable ways.

The category “peasant” was also deployed in order to justify and explain the deviations from the desired theoretical lines of action. However, the usage of the “peasant” category usually leads to the “invisible hand” style of explanations, which does not explore the emergent subjectivities of the villagers. I will again quote a passage from Namboodripad (1961: 39) to show how he is using the category, “peasant,” without any reference to the distinctions within the group that he refers to as the peasants.

Those who are serious about carrying out agrarian reform should depend not so much on the merits and demerits of particular schemes of land reform as on the question of which scheme or schemes are those that have been evolved and are being implemented by the mass of peasants. It may be that the mass of peasantry would like to have a particular scheme of land reforms which from a scientific point of view, is not so good as some other scheme worked out by certain intellectuals, that, however, should not lead any revolutionary, who is serious about carrying out real agrarian reform, to the rejection of the scheme evolved by the peasants themselves, based on their own experiences and understanding.

In this comment, Namboodripad rightly points out the differences between intellectuals' and actual individuals' understanding of change. However, he avoids the question of power and difference within "the peasant." The peasant emerges as a singular actor and he thinks that the ultimate trajectory of the change should be left to "the peasant." However, the organized peasants of the peasant association or frontal organization of the peasant of the Communist Party came from those who had quasi-proprietary rights in land that they sought to extend and did not want the agricultural laborers to enjoy rights similar to what they have gotten (see Herring 1983).

Land redistribution, decentralization and cultural change in rural West Bengal

Next, we turn to the land redistribution in West Bengal, where the Marxists came to power as a part of coalition called the United Front in 1967. As the most important coalition partner of the United Front, the Marxists sought to strengthen their mass organizations in West Bengal and Kerala. In the words of the CPM party program, the core and the basis of party's effort in West Bengal

and Kerala after the assumption of power in 1967 was to consist of a “firm alliance of working class and the peasantry,” brought about by aggressive party work in trade unions and peasant organizations and directed against other political parties in these two states. The Marxist election slogan was, as it was in Kerala, “Land to the tiller.” For this reason it was essential that the CPM control the portfolios of Land and Land Revenue and Labor and Home (especially Police) since these ministries would determine the nature of government policy on land and “peasants.”

Once in power the Marxists adopted a flexible approach with regard to the definition of “the peasantry.” While before the election Marxists took a radical pro-tiller stand making the tillers almost synonymous with the peasant, after being elected to power, priorities shifted to building and maintaining the partnerships with coalition members who would threaten to quit and to join hands with opposition Congress party if their agendas were not fulfilled. Expediencies of electoral politics and increasing the membership of ordinary villagers also necessitated the shift in strategy and therefore the “redefinition” of the term peasant. The shift was evident in the tactical line laid out by the party documents. A document titled *New Situation and Party’s Tasks* argued that “different sections of the peasantry play different roles in the revolution”²⁵, implying that all rural groups could be courted by the party except the rural landlords. Thus, the flexible policy adopted towards recruiting different kinds of

²⁵ Published in 1968 by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

villagers who were now classified as “middle peasants,” “rich peasants,” or poor peasants,” reflect the Namboodripad’s theoretical line that grew out of the Marxist political practice in Kerala.

The movement for land redistribution in West Bengal stemmed from the Congress Party’s policy of land reform, as embodied in the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act of 1954 that theoretically placed a ceiling of 25 acres on landholdings but also provided a number of legal means for exceeding the ceiling. Three of the principal methods by which lands in excess of 25 acres²⁶ had been controlled are 1) *benami* transfer, which involved transfer of land titles to relatives; 2) holding of agricultural land as fisheries that are excluded from the 25 acres ceiling in the legislation; 3) holding of land in excess of 25 acres through private agreements between landholders and tenants or between landholders and government with the title to the land legally in the name of the tenant or state government but the produce apportioned as though the title were in the name of the landlord. Shortly after the United Front government came to power in 1967, the state Land and Land Revenue Minister (Hare Krishna Konar), a leading member of the Marxist party, indicated that the new policy of the government would be to “recover land involved in *benami* and other transactions with popular cooperation.”²⁷ The police in the rural areas were instructed by the new government to “not suppress the democratic and legitimate struggles of the

²⁶ This was also very high, given the number of dependents on land.

²⁷ Quoted from Sen Gupta (1983: 61)

peasants.”²⁸ The minister then initiated a series of investigations to trace *benami* and other holdings in excess of 25 acres.

In 1967, the newly elected government redistributed 248,000 acres of land, which largely was earmarked by the previous Congress government but not distributed because of political favoritism. Moreover, the land revenue department traced 13,400,000 acres of *benami* land (Franda 1971). The land reforms and redistribution were implemented in consultation with leaders of local government bodies and with “representatives of the local peasants’ association or the *krishak sabha*.” A particularly important strategy adopted by the minister, Konar, in implementing land reforms was to make mass organization, local party members, and police act in unison. Konar argued that the police had the “habit of readily going into action on complaints from big landholders or landlords,” and he therefore instructed police officials to consult officers of the Land revenue department before they decided to act on the basis of big landholders’ or landlords’ complaints. At the same time, the rural mass organizations were asked to pass information about how excess land was kept by the landlords and big landholders.

As a result of this policy, a large number of rural politicians began to organize villagers to take possession of land held in excess of 25 acres—particularly *benami* lands, fisheries, and land held in the names of tenants and the state government. The Marxist party even issued a directive to party-workers to

²⁸ Ibid (p. 70)

“recover *benami* lands and distribute them among the peasants” (Franda 1971: 67). These movements were often led by the tenant farmers or small landholders rather than landless laborers because the Marxist party had by then made the definition of peasantry very flexible to include small landholders and tenant farmers. While in some cases land was transferred from big landlords to the landless, the main beneficiaries were the small landholders and the tenant farmers who had infiltrated the local branches of the party. Thus, land redistribution resulted in transfer of land from big landlords, who were supporters of the Congress Party, to small landholders and tenant farmers who became progressively influential in rural politics in holding onto and expanding their rights in land. Even the Land Revenue minister, Konar, acknowledged that the land redistribution movement would have little effect on the status of West Bengal’s landless laborers, and he attempted to reassure the small landholders again and again that “everything would be done to protect the small landholders’ interests.”²⁹

Despite the inability of the Marxists to give substantial land to the truly landless and protect their access to land, the land redistribution movement was revolutionary in terms of political change in the rural areas. The movement led to increased expectations among small landholders and they enhanced their power and holding size as land was redistributed on a massive scale. The movement

²⁹ Quoted in Sen Gupta (1983: 89).

eroded the support base of the Congress party and created a group of small landholders, tenant farmers, and landless people loyal to the Marxists.

The land reform program was discontinued between 1971 and 1977. During this period, West Bengal had plunged into major political turmoil. The land redistribution in villages, and competition among various Left parties to increase their membership and authoritarian acts of Central government under the Congress party led by Indira Gandhi were responsible for 6 years of political instability. Land reform programs were revived when the Left Front government came to power in 1977 with the Marxist party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) getting the largest number of seats. Thus, land reforms and land redistribution in West Bengal took place in two phases. In the first phase (1967) almost 10, 00,000 acres of fertile agricultural land were recovered from the big landlords' ceiling surplus holdings. In the second phase, which started in 1978 and continued till 1989, names of 1,300,000 sharecroppers were registered so that the sharecroppers could not be evicted from the land by the big landlords at their whims and fancy (Sengupta 1983: 171). However, the benefits of both the phases accrued mainly to small landholders and tenant farmers. Many tenant farmers turned themselves into small landholders (see Franda 1971).

However, the benefits notwithstanding, few among the small landholders saw the Marxist party as a reliable ally because of the party's influence among the landless agricultural laborers. The lack of strong support among the small landholders became evident when the Left Front government tried to implement

the three tier local government or the Panchayat system. In 1978 the Marxists had to nominate 65,000 candidates in the Panchayat elections. The Marxist party did not have many active members who could represent the party in the villages at that time. The poor and the landless members of the Marxist party did not have necessary political capital and networks to contest the local government body elections. The small landholding individuals were the ones who were locally influential, but they were suspicious of the Marxist party.³⁰ However, they found that joining the Marxist party might win them votes and support of many in the villages after decline of the Congress party. Thus, the small-land-holders started entering the Marxist party to protect their interests. Statistically, in 1978's Panchayat elections, only 7 percent of the Marxist candidates in the Panchayat came from landless groups, and 93 percent came from the small landholding groups. However, the Marxist party could show that 50 percent of the candidates did not own any land because many of their candidates were young and did not have any land in their name, even though came from small landowning households. Moreover, many of these young candidates were primary and secondary school teachers in the villages. Thus, the relationship of these individuals with agricultural production was primarily supervisory, or the small landholders and tenant farmers who secured their rights in land had gradually started transforming themselves into supervisory farmers.

³⁰ Interview with Debabrata Bandyopadhyaya published in Ekok Matra, October 2006.

The school teachers would play a key role in the cultural and political change that would accompany the Left's coming to power and gradual entrenchment of Left politics and the Marxist party in rural West Bengal. The political engagement of the school teachers had begun in pre-Left Front years, when many school teachers were involved in various kinds of social service organizations, including Gandhian movements in villages. Association with Marxist parties began also with the involvement of the family members in politics of land redistribution. Many of the school teachers were first generation literates of small landholding or tenant families that secured rights and access to land due to land redistribution. The role of the newly literate and the school teachers became much more prominent with the implementation of Left Front's decentralization program that established three tier local government structures in rural West Bengal.

Before I discuss cultural change and the role of the school teachers in fuller detail, I will briefly sketch the impact of the decentralization program. The decentralization program entailed strengthening of the local government bodies. Although local government bodies existed in the pre-Left Front (Marxist government) years, these local government bodies or *panchayats* were mostly ineffective when it came to taking concrete decisions regarding village affairs. Moreover, elections to these local government bodies were not held regularly. Often the landlord would nominate his cronies as the members of the *Panchayat*, and participation by other political parties except the landlord's own party, i.e.

the Congress party, was mostly prohibited (see Sen Gupta 1983). The decentralization project of the Left Front started holding regular elections, involved the local government bodies in bureaucratic affairs, and also encouraged party-politics at the level of government. Moreover, the decentralization project institutionalized the three tier structure of local governance. The three-tier structure comprises representation on the basis of universal adult franchisee at three levels. At the lowest rung or tier were the *gram* or village *panchayats*. Each village has a gram panchayat. Above the village panchayats are the *Panchayat Samities*. The domain of the *Panchayat Samities* comprises of several villages and is organized at the level of administrative blocks. The *Zilla parishads* are organized at the district level. Elections are held at each of these three tiers every five years. Moreover, elections to *Panchayats* are separate from the elections to the state assembly or the parliament (see Webster 1991).

The impact of the decentralization program was far reaching. As local government bodies overlapped with the formal administrative structure of village, block and districts, bureaucracy was brought very close to the village in an unprecedented manner (Bhattacharya 1999). The *Panchayat* as an institution was attached to bureaucracy at every stage of the implementation of policies especially land redistributive policies. Thus, bureaucracy became more accountable and also sometimes subservient to the local politics. Some bureaucratic functions such as the recording of the sharecroppers were

physically moved from the towns to the villages (Sen Gupta 1983). Often, “reorientation camps” were held in public places where the land reform officers took special initiatives to record all sharecroppers. This method stood in sharp contrast with earlier methods of recording sharecroppers at the landlord’s premises where the sharecropper never came without fear (Sen Gupta 1983).

The *gram panchayat* emerged as the primary institution of village politics that bridged the formal and informal aspects of power and authority in the village. The *gram Panchayat* became the site of expression of multiple interests in the villages. The politics of *gram panchayats* became the mediating mechanism that would attempt to maintain the precarious balance between these multiplicity of interests. The power of the small landholders and tenant farmer-sharecroppers who gained from the land reform programs came to dominate the *gram Panchayat* politics, which became the central dispenser of resources in the village economy. The funds for public works such building of roads and canals and dispersion of agricultural loans and seeds started taking place through *Panchayats*. Thus, it is at the level of *gram Panchayats* that the small landholders’ and tenant farmers’ newly gained power and the power of the Marxists converged and was consolidated.

Panchayat politics became the center of the formation of new “peasant” or *chasi* identity, which created space for participation but at the same time marginalized the landless or dispersed patronage among them very selectively. Various case-studies of relationships between small landowning villagers and

the agricultural laborers report that the Marxist party practiced ritualization tactics when it came to mediating a negotiation between the small landholders and agricultural laborers. Almost every wage negotiation, writes Dwaipayan Bhattacharya (1991), between the agricultural workers and small landowners would be routinely preceded by a strike. The laborers usually stuck to the rate supplied by the Marxist party; the Marxist party regarded such strikes as manifestations of class struggle against the small landholders; the landholders usually agreed at the end of the negotiation to raise the wage up to a rate lower than the official rate with full consent of the party; workers withdrew their strike in response and got back to work with a sense of gratitude to the party. Such a sequence usually led to the mutual satisfaction of the contending sections of the village.

Other studies report that small landholders felt threatened by campaigns for fair wages to the agricultural laborers. Moreover, this is especially true for poorer small landholder families. Even a modest increase in wages of the landless laborers would create bad feelings among the small and marginal landowners. Glyn Williams (1991: 103) quotes one such small land owner in Durgagram in Bardhaman in West Bengal. The small land owner complains:

Casual labor is much worse today: there are wage increases, but the work they do is less and they need constant supervision. This is partly a political matter, but the availability of non-agricultural work in factories in the neighboring village and Siuri has pushed up the rate.

Thus, the Marxist party never tried much to politicize the issue of small landholder- agricultural laborer relationship because of electoral survival. Rather the category “peasant” was used by the party to present a picture of harmonious rural social relationships. This harmoniousness hid the internal differentiation within the rural groups and enabled the small landholders or *chasis* to prosper at the expense of the absolutely landless, the *majurs*. Since small landowners stand to lose from land reforms owing to their effects on the cost of hired labor, Bardhan and Mookherjee (2000: 34) expect the principal political opposition to the further land reforms to arise from small landholders. Their statistical evidence from a sample survey from across the seventeen districts of West Bengal also show that the proportion of households receiving land titles was significantly lower when there were more small landowners and when the land distribution became more equal owing to market sales or family subdivisions.

The position of the school teachers was particularly helpful in controlled politicization of the rural social relationships. Villagers usually treated the school teachers as the only people with a detached attitude to village conflicts and the ability to reach a solution acceptable to all. As the principal source of income for the teachers was not agricultural, their tangible interests were perceived as external to the peasant society. The ability of the school teachers to act as bridge between world or field of village politics and the world of high politics practiced at the scales of the *Panchayat samiti*, *Zilla parishad*, and the state. Thus, the school teachers would act as interpreters of legal niceties crucial for running the gram

Panchyat. Knowledge and literacy in wider senses of these terms became the source of power and prestige of the school teachers in the villages. The school teachers not only played important role in local organs of the political parties including the Marxist party. They were also members of local committees at the village *Panchyats* and their actions were not always consistent with directives of the Marxist party. In short, the school teachers mediated between what was known as *gramer kaj* or village activities and *sorkari kaj* or activities of administration or government or higher politics. The latter became more and more inseparable with the rise of the Marxist party.

Left Politics and Cultural Change in Rural West Bengal

The school teachers and the literate villagers were, however, bringing in another more important change in the village that overlapped with the events leading to Left Front's coming to power in 1977. The school teachers were also primary conduits of the urban ideas and lifestyles to the rural areas. The spread of literacy and school education contributed to this differentiation as small landholders got introduced to urban *bhadralok* ideas and literature. A number of literary works, such as novels of Manik Bandyopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay appeared that spoke directly to the educated villagers about the problems of village society.

The force of the ideology of modernity and progress on the newly educated small landholding individuals and how that changed their

subjectivities and self-understandings was evident in a diary written by a village small landholder by the name of Selimmaster³¹. Selimmaster of Udaynala village in south West Bengal was requested to write about his village. He had produced a small notebook that expressed his views on the good and bad sides of Udayanala in 1960. Selimmaster's notebook records the "negative" aspects of the village life or the inconveniences or *asubidha* more than the positive aspects. The author saw laziness, money lending, lack of a road, and factionalism as the problems of the village. Selimmaster wrote that the economic situation of the villagers is difficult because "most villagers are reluctant to work" –they were "lazy." As a possible redress of these problems, Selimmaster proposed *unnayan* (development) and *paribartan* (change, progress). *Unnayan* and *paribartan* are not being realized by, according to Selimmaster, factionalism, money lending and the lack of an all-weather road. However, Selimmaster's idea of development or *unnayan* was based on communal cooperation and an idea of "honorable government." Selimmaster writes:

A group of young volunteers would have to be formed. A community of paddy storage will have to be arranged and money lending will have to be curbed. The cooperative society will have to be improved (or developed) and land should be tilled cooperatively. (Ruud 199:127)

Selimmaster's vision was influenced by a Gandhian socialist thinking that tried to revive the essence of rural life in cooperation and voluntarism that he, like

³¹ The diary has been published by Arild Engelsen Ruud (1999)

many other Bengali urban *bhadrolok* elite thought was being destroyed by the Westernization and modernization and industries. However, Selimmaster also found the village society sunk in ignorance and superstition and lacking an economic life and cooperation. He saw himself as a part of the young would-be village leadership who would bring change in the village. He also organized the *tarun dal* or the “young group” to turn some of his ideas into reality.

Selimmaster’s notebook also shows how the cultural life of the villages were changing not only through political speeches but also by villagers taking part in organizing cultural events that celebrated birthdays of the “national” poet Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul, and Independence day and the Bengali New year. Such events comprised of recitals of poetry, songs and staging plays or *jatra*. The ideas of modernity, nation, progress and equality were introduced by such poetries and songs also novels of noted Bengali novelists also became available to the villagers. Arild Engelsen Ruud (1999) writes that popularity of the novels in rural Bengal must be seen as a significant development in contrast with the people’s reading habits till the 40’s and 50’s when people mostly read epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. The idea of the Indian nation and the Bengali nation formed the framework of novels of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya³², and Tarashakar Bandyopadhyay and also of Rabindranath Tagore.

³² In Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s ‘Devdas’, the hero ‘Devdas’ lives in idyllic enchantment with his lover in the villages. When Devdas is forbidden from marrying the woman he loves he takes off for the city of Kolkata and it is there that he gives himself up to alcohol with dogged determination.

However, the *Bhadralok* idea of nationalism was distinctive in its admiration for and romanticization of “the rural” and “the peasant” as the real India or Bengal. This romantic ideas also influenced the way urban *bhadralok* left activists perceived the “rural.” The city was portrayed as a place where the undesirables live with their crass and immoral ways. In the popular novels the city is the home of the black marketer, the cheat, the swindler. Villagers do not drink, smoke or play the fool in nightclubs like city people do. Such ideas are reflected in the actions and the activities of the school teacher and village intellectuals as in evident from Selimmaster’s diary. Other field studies show that often the village intellectuals and school teachers organized Lok Sevak Sangh, a Gandhian social service organization to promote an egalitarian spirit and harmony in the villages. Below, I quote one verse that was recited by the members of Lok Sevak Sangh:

neiko raja nei ko praja nei ko koumi dwesh/ gorbo mora shob somaner desh”

There will be no king, no subject, no enmity between communities / We will build a land of equals”

Or the slogan: “the real India is her villages.”

Apart from the dissemination of modern ideas and values through novels, the staging of plays or *jatra* played an important role in transforming the subjectivities of villagers in early 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s. *Jatra* was originally performed to dramatize the epics. In Calcutta, since the mid nineteenth century, a European style theater tradition had developed in which “folk” forms were

shunned. The gap between these two theater traditions would be bridged very late during the last days of the British rule. Leftist playwrights, particularly of Indian People's Theater Association, sought to bring their message to villagers through the medium of *jatra*. In course of time, Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA: Leftist cultural front) declined, but it influenced the indigenous village forms substantially. Over the years, the repertoire of rural *jatras* became broader and the standard characters came to include contemporary figures such as the landlord, the money lender, and the corrupt politician.

Jatras and plays were performed not only by professionals but also by village amateurs (boys and young men). The *jatra* performance, with its transformation and participation of young people in staging of plays, represented a captivating new role for the village youngsters. The young men became teachers of their community who conveyed the ideals of modernity, progress and development. The actors identified themselves with or were identified with the culture of literature, and with the role model of the modern social reformer-teacher *bhadralok* (see Ruud1999).

However, the *bhadralok* identity could never completely dominate the identities of the small landholding rural individuals. This was partly because urban lifestyle was also morally looked down upon by the villagers, and the access to urban space, service jobs and higher education was limited and restricted. The *bhadralok* culture was adopted by the small landholding groups to maintain their distinction from the groups that had caste status lower than them.

A parallel valorization of the rural and the *chasi* identity was also an integral component of the how small landholding villagers constructed their self-understanding and self-images. Selimmaster's Gandhian ideas are a product of such valorization of the rural and the community. But this valorization of the rural started existing side by side with a desire for urbanization and non-farm or white collar employment. The relationship between the *bhadralok* identity and *chasi* identity is best understood in terms of a dis-identification³³ (see Louisa Schein 1999, 367) i.e. the rural small landholders did not completely identify with the *bhadralok* lifestyles but also did not completely counter-identify with it. They chose a middle-path that also creates desires for urbanization and non-farm employment without giving up their position of landholders in the villages.

However, with the values of modernization and progress also came the idea of equality. The idea of equality got expressed in the patronizing attitude of the small landholders to the groups of landless. Their patronizing stance is also the characteristic of the Marxist party members in the villages (see Ben Rogally 1999, Ruud 2000). The local members of the regime also used the land redistributive provisions also to punish certain small landholding individuals who would switch loyalties.

The distinction between the small landholding villagers, who usually belong to middle castes, and the castes lower than them were expressed by terms

³³ The *bhadralok* culture is not as oppressive and normalizing as the official culture in China that Louisa Schein explores because it is self-critical, nonetheless it is hegemonic.

of the words *chasi* and *majur*—*chasis* being ritually clean cultivators and peasants and *majurs* being laborers of ritually unclean caste groups. While the ritual cleanliness and pollution are the distinctions given by Hindu and brahmanic norms, the distinctions are mostly generated from local contexts. The distinction on sexual mores of the *chasi* and the *majur* speaks to differences in social power between these two groups. The sexual norms of the *majur* are believed to be lax compared to those of the *chasi*. The *majur*, it is believed, largely accept pre-marital and extra-marital sex. The dissemination of urban *bhadralok* culture contributed to the sense of restraint that the *chasi* small landholders tried to cultivate vis-à-vis the *majur*. Thus, the idea and ability of self-governability, discipline, self control, and moderation became the practical ideals of the *chashi*, but these were also promoted through Left politics and dissemination of urban cultural values of modernization and progress (see Ruud 1999).

Consequently, the *bhadralok* model, including literary pursuits and political Leftism, blended well with the *chashi* lifestyle. Moreover, the small landholders and the tenant farmers gradually started becoming more and more supervisory farmers, as I said before. The land redistribution and application of green revolution technologies and rise of agricultural production in the 60's and 70's contributed to transformation of the *chashi* identity that did not completely merge with the *bhadralok* identity. Small landholding individuals who called themselves *chashi* maintained their distinction and cultivated a sense of pride in the *chashi* lifestyle that came to represent teetotalism and hard work. A *chashi* was

seen as a knowledgeable person different from a *chasha* who was a rustic fellow. However, there are instances of groups belonging to castes lower than the usual *chashi*-castes who became socially mobile after their rights to land were secured and adopted a *chashi* lifestyle (see Williams 1999).

Impact of the Green Revolution

Next, I will discuss the impact of the green revolution and land redistribution on agriculture in West Bengal and the tensions that it created within the *chasi* or “peasant” identity. In the post land-reform years, between early 1980’s and the early 1990’s, food grains production in West Bengal grew by between 4.3 percent and 6.5 percent per annum. This exceeded the growth rates of neighboring states in eastern India (see Bose et. al. 2001). Whether the growth in agriculture was due to redistributive land reform policies has remained a matter of debate, but the benefits of the growth have accrued to the poorer groups of small landholders in the villages. Technological inputs in terms of irrigation facilities and high yielding variety of seeds and fertilizers are keys to the growth of farm productivity. The main proximate causes of growth were the adoption of higher yielding varieties of monsoonal *aman* paddy, still the most important crop in West Bengal, and summer *boro* paddy in rotation with *aman*. Both of these forms of intensive cultivation of crops were enabled by the rapid spread of ground water irrigation mainly in the form of privately owned shallow tubewells. However, as water levels dropped mini-submersible tubewells were

introduced. Other trends include a rapid increase in the cultivation of potato, a potentially high value winter *rabi* season crop that could be cultivated in rotation with *aman* paddy.

Land redistribution and rise in production led to a modicum of prosperity among the small landholders. Various studies have shown that supervisory owner-cultivator farmers mostly act like capitalist farmers who use technology to raise farm productivity and also cultivate crops that fetch more money (Basu 1991). The *chasi* or “peasant” identity based on progress and modernity got consolidated during this period of increasing prosperity from the 1960’s to the 1990’s

Since the mid-1990’s there has been a slowdown in agricultural production in West Bengal (Bose et. al. 1999). Some studies show that the slowdown in agricultural production might have been caused by a rapid drop in the water table. The intensive use of ground-water has been blamed for shortages in the state’s three main canal-feeding reservoirs. In 1997 the *boro* paddy season was in crisis in at least four districts: Howrah, Hooghli (location of my field site), Murshidabad, and Birbhum. The state was urged to purchase water from the neighboring state of Bihar. A further serious environmental threat that has been linked to intensive ground water irrigation is the widespread arsenic poisoning in drinking water in West Bengali villages. Research has found that over 200,000 people in seven districts of West Bengal suffer from arsenic-related diseases attributable to drinking water from contaminated wells and that a likely cause of

this contamination was heavy ground water irrigation. Ground water irrigation also involves heavy subsidies on electricity in the villages.

While land redistribution and agricultural subsidies had given rise to a *chasi* identity based on the ideas of “development” and “progress,” this identity or self-image or self-understanding has been in crisis due to subdivision of land, declining agricultural productivity and absence of non-farm employment and income opportunities. Moreover, the inculcation of urban lifestyles and education strengthened the desires for urbanization, urban employment and luxury goods and commodities, such as television, motorcycles, and mobile phones. This crisis also strained the relationship and understanding that the small landholders developed with the Marxist regime. To illustrate the desire for goods and commodities, I will describe an incident that took place in 2001 in Calcutta and the incident was reported on 26th May in newspapers, such as Anandabazar Patrika and The Telegraph.

A stunning event took place in Calcutta in May 2001. Truckloads of villagers from the countryside almost invaded the city with the objective of buying Chinese consumer goods. Rumor was rife that due to the lifting of restrictions on imports, unbelievably cheap Chinese goods, such as televisions, utensils, clothes, tape recorders, video-players and many more, would be sold at the Netaji Indoor Stadium in Calcutta. Arriving at the Stadium early in the morning, the villagers had queued up like disciplined soldiers. By ten o’ clock, the unnerved administration deputed cops in riot gears to disperse the crowd.

They declared over loudspeakers that no such 'Sale' is scheduled to take place but in vain. At about 12, the impatient crowd threatened to smash the gates. In order to avoid trouble, the gates were opened. Representatives went inside the Stadium and reported back to their folks. Convinced that the venue has been shifted to prevent them from buying the cheap *foren* (foreign) goods in limited supply and that the administration had connived with the rich to corner the goodies for themselves, the disappointed crowd left with bitterness. An anthropologist, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, reported that the villagers said that the cheap goods as "*Globalization Daan*" or gift of globalization (see Mukhopadhyay 2005: 38) which has been denied to them by the government. The incident shows that the desire for an "improved" lifestyle and the belief in the promise of *Globalization* are not simply urban elite phenomena.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the Left Front's and the Marxist party or CPI (M)'s hegemony in West Bengali villages is based on a particular kind of land-based governmentality. Governmentality refers to an individual's ability to control himself or herself and the way this self-control is linked to forms of political rule. The Marxist rule in West Bengal emerged and was maintained by land redistribution and also by cultivating a particular identity or self-understanding of being progressive and modern that was crucially dependent on landownership. This identity or self-understanding was not dependent on landownership simply for purposes of production but purposes of maintaining

social distinctions within the village and also to valorize the “rural” and the “peasant” vis-à-vis the urban. Thus, over the years the Marxist government has nourished a land-based subjectivity among the small landholders or *chashis* who see themselves as more “developed” than the landless *majurs*. The key to this relationship between the regime and the small landholders is what I call an “implicit understanding.” I will develop the concept in the next chapter.

The foregoing discussion also shows that rural modernity in the West Bengali villages has two aspects. One aspect is cultivation of private interests around farming and landownership based on individual possession of land. The effect of this has been constant fragmentation as brothers divided their plot up across generations and also adoption of urban lifestyles and desire for non farm employment. Another concomitant and contradictory aspect of land-based self understanding was to valorize the rural vis-a vis the urban and to conceive of farming and agriculture as an activity that constitutes the very substance of society or the social whole. This was evident in Selimmaster’s comments in his diaries. While both the aspects are peculiarly modern and contemporary, they contradict each other. Thus, cultural politics in rural West Bengal, especially among the small landholding groups, entails both mimicking and emulation of the urban *Bhadralok* practices and at the same time practicing social distancing from both the urban *Bhadralok* and the lower caste *majurs*. This is why K. Sivaramakrishnan (2004: 368) notes that “both mimicry and social distancing

become key modes of conducting cultural politics in the context of civilizational processes.”

Chapter 4: Meanings of Land.

This chapter examines meanings of land in the light of debates regarding compensation for acquired land between the activists and politicians who opposed the Nano project and the state. The state government announced cash and monetary compensation for the plots that it sought to acquire and invited the activists (urban and local) for further discussion on rehabilitation. But the opposition party members, rural protestors and urban activists emphasized the emotional attachment that small landholders have to their land. The government officials had asked the local leader of Trinamul Congress to point out which plots were fertile and which were infertile, and they promised that the compensation would be paid accordingly³⁴ without rechecking whether his report was true or false. However, the local leader of Trinamul Congress refused to yield because doing that would mean giving in to the government's claim that land acquisition can be compensated and rehabilitated. According to the Trinamul Congress leader agricultural or arable land was like a mother to the small landholders and monetary compensation and rehabilitation could never be enough.

This chapter explores the difficulties of compensating for land acquisition and the impasse between the activists and the state regarding compensation, by examining what land means for the small landholding villagers. While there is an emotional attachment to land among the small landholders, the emotional attachment to land is not devoid of various calculative or instrumental aspects of

³⁴ Personal interview with the Member of Legislative Assembly (West Bengal).

life, which includes desires for non-farm employment and maintenance of social position in the villages. Rather, the calculative aspects form the very substance of emotional bonding with land because in the last few years meanings of land have been reconfigured by larger historical processes such as Green Revolution, land redistribution, construction of highway and modicum prosperity among the small landholders. Such reconfiguration has given rise to new kinds of expectations from the state – a new rural moral economy – and has also led to an emergence of “implicit understanding” between the small landholders and the regime – the issues that I explore later in this chapter.

This reconfiguration is often missed by the urban activists who supported the anti-Nano peasant protestors’ cause. The urban activists romanticized small landholders’ attachment to land by seeing land in terms of productionist logic. This productionist logic saw land as simply the soil that grows crops and provides food and hence it saw land as a mother who nurtures and feeds “the peasant.” The urban activists saw the emotional attachment in terms of a pure and primordial attachment devoid of desire for power and position and “development.” This chapter seeks to contest this productionist and romanticized view of land which makes the peasant a distinctive rural type, in anthropological literature on “peasants” as Micheal Kearney (1996: 18) has noted. Kearney says that it is a special cognition of “land” as not only physical but of special primary value from which other social, cultural or economic value are produced, such that from it the “peasant” is able to construct his or her physical,

cultural, and social identity. This special relationship of the “peasant” to land based on an idea that the “peasant” provides for himself or herself his/her food is the key characteristic that distinguishes the ideal “peasant” from the ideal “non-peasant.” The “non-peasant”, if he/she is a “farmer,” produces value from land, but that value is exchange value that is consumed by the proletariat and other “non-peasant” groups. This oppositional understanding of value—use and exchange value—is the core of many other dualisms in conventional political economy, Kearney asserts. The dualisms are “peasant-non-peasant,” rural-urban, and subaltern-dominant. It is because of such dualisms, Kearney notes, that students of resistance have focused on resistance of the “peasants” against their class superiors, such as landlords and the state. However, they have failed, Kearney says, to address the intense competition and struggles within “the peasantry.”

In the introduction, I argued that in order to explain the second paradox about protests and counter-protests we need to shift, following Michael Kearney, from a dualistic model of studying peasant politics to a multidimensional field of social practice with sharp attention to internal differentiation within the peasantry or villagers in form of complex configuration of personal identity or self-understanding or subjectivity of various groups in the villages. This self-understanding is crucially shaped by possession of land and not simply by the ability to produce one’s own food. Land is a marker of prestige, influence, security, and money earned by selling land also serves as dowry for the

daughter, ability to employ the landless' labor, object of dispute between brothers, neighbors and families and also local members of the political party. The speculative value of land, dependent on industrialization and urbanization, also plays a part in rural social relationships and distinctions. In short, possession of land is the core of the subjective identity that makes small landholders desire development, urban and non-farm employment. However, industries, development and urbanization also require land. But giving up land also leads to loss of prestige, security and social positions. This is the basic contradiction that this chapter explores.

In light of the above significance of land in the life of a small landholder, we need to look critically at what land means to the so called peasants and thereby develop an understanding of land that goes beyond the usual dualistic theory of value—i.e. in terms of the exchange value and the use value. Thus, I argue that the importance of land must be understood not simply as use value (which the activists tend to do by emphasizing a natural relationship between land and small landholders) or simply as exchange value (which the state in my case tends to do by only offering monetary compensation). Land gets its value and meaning in my field site, I argue, from internal differentiation within the “peasantry” whom I prefer to call villagers and small landholders.

The need for a framework that goes beyond the usual dualistic model (i.e. simply in terms of its use-value or exchange-value) has been felt by many perceptive authors. In the context of Brazil, Wendy Wolford (2002) shows how

possession of land transforms the subjectivity of the landless workers so much that they start behaving almost like the landed, who earlier deprived them of land. Tania Li (2007) notes that in Indonesia, the activists were surprised, when they found that the erstwhile landless individuals show a strong desire to maintain their separate holdings instead of giving them up to a cooperative. Ronald Herring (1995) has shown that landless tillers once given land tend to be supervisory farmers rather than till their own land. Thus, the romantic views of the radical activists, who try to redistribute land among the landless or poor villagers, have always been challenged. However, the significance of land in the formation of social distinctions among groups and individuals is less recognized. A production analytic of looking at the significance of land predominates. An exploration of land-based subjectivities or self-understandings in terms of social distinctions should be the starting point of understanding meanings of land, I contend.

Hence, as I have already proposed in the introduction, in order to understand the meanings of land, we must look at the village as a social field. The rest of the chapter is divided into the following sections. The first section examines the changes brought about by Green Revolution. The second section explores the social field and complex pattern of land relations in the villages. The third section looks at the implicit understanding between the state and the small landholding individuals. The fourth section shows the limitations of land-based

rule of the Marxist government and the contradictions within the subjectivity of the small landowning villagers.

Green Revolution and Changing Agrarian Ecology of Singur

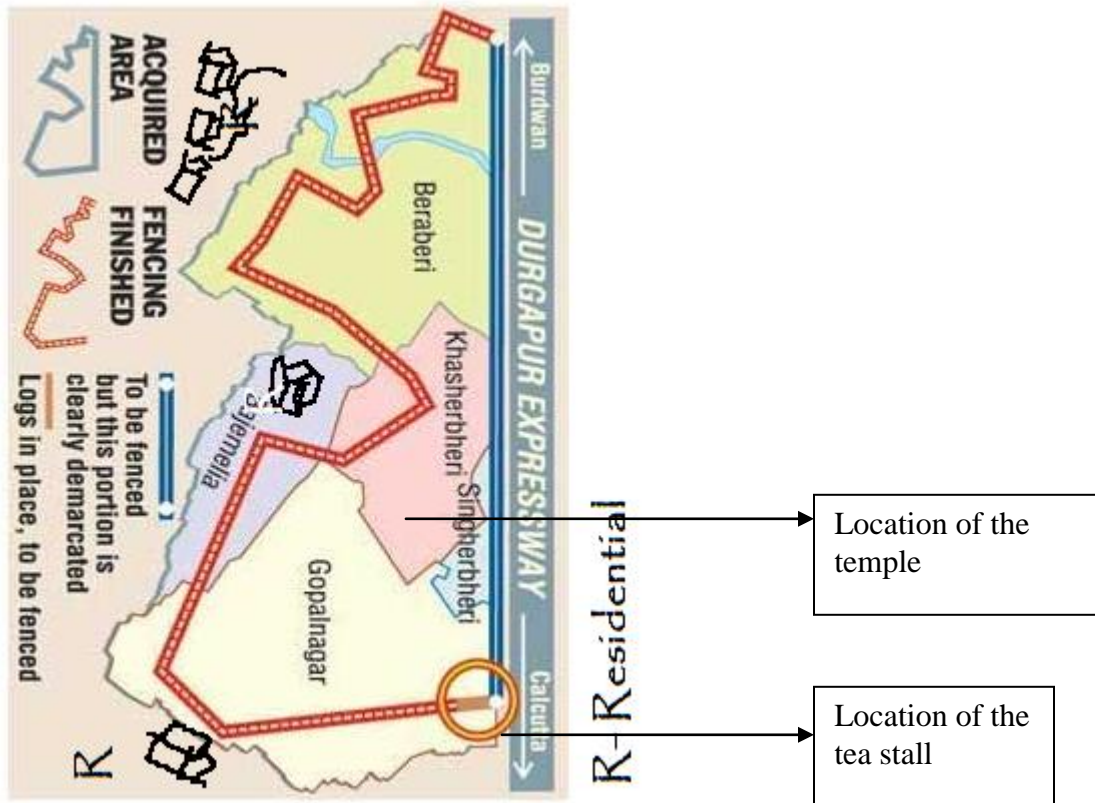
The districts of West Bengal underwent the “green revolution” in 1965. The green revolution in Singur consisted of the introduction of high yielding varieties of paddy or wet rice. The most important of these was the paddy that grows in the winter months or in the off-season, locally known as the *boro* variety. The seed variety is known as Taichung Native 1. The concomitant improvements in irrigation facilities, such as installation of pumps to draw underground water have changed the agricultural profile of Singur. Single cropped plots have been turned into double or triple-cropped ones. Hence the names of the villages that are based on character of land in those villages do not always describe the current agricultural profile of the villages. The names of the villages in Singur were *Singherbheri*, *Khaserbheri*, and *Berabheri*. *Bheri* in Bengali means swampy land suitable for shrimp cultivation. Government records often have not been updated for reasons that I will discuss later. This is also the reason behind contentious views regarding the elevation of the land, fertility, and crop pattern and therefore the compensation price.

The thousand acre stretch that would be acquired for the automobile factory lay between two motor-able roads. On the east is the highway that connects Calcutta with Delhi and other small towns. The other was a comparatively

narrower road, joining Calcutta with suburban towns. Almost perpendicularly intersecting these roads on the northern and southern sides of the stretch are two streams. On the North lies a canal called *Jhulkia* and on the south is located another canal called the *Doiba khal* (see Maps). The affected villages are situated on the banks of the canals. The elevation of the stretch is hogher towards the residential areas and slopes down gradually towards the middle. Hence, with the improvement of ground water exploitation and technological input the arable land gradually extended from the sides towards the middle. However, right in the middle of the acquired area the elevation falls drastically and approximately 300 acres remain mostly uncultivated and marshy. Nevertheless, that portion is also claimed. Tiny plots there are also owned by small-landholding farmers residing in the surrounding villages.



Map 5: Satellite view of the area.



Map 6: Map of the acquired area. Source: The Telegraph 1st December, 2006.

The green stretch that can be seen from the highway was pointed out by both pro-project and anti-project villagers to give opposite arguments. While the anti-project villagers would talk about pumps, fertility, and multiple harvests, the pro-project villagers would say that if one went deep inside the area scheduled for acquisition, the elevation and fertility declines and after very heavy rainfall the stretch would get completely submerged. The money that the government would give for land, the pro-project villagers would say, will give more money every year if it is deposited in the monthly income scheme of Indian

government than it would if it was cultivated. The map that the government had issued and several copies of which were circulating in the villages and the block development offices only showed the plot numbers. It did not say anything about the quality of the plots. Many of small landholding farmers themselves did not know how their plots have been classified.

At the middle of the plot that was acquired, there is a temple of the goddess Kali, run by a local non-Brahman priest. The temple is located under the shade of banyan tree. At present village youngsters would gather at the spot to drink alcohol or to smoke *ganja* (marijuana). The priest of the temple was more than sixty years of age. He said that when he was young he had a trance that led him to establish the temple. He did not have much money so he had to collect money from the villagers to build the temple. However, when I asked him about ownership of the land, he said the spot was used to cremate dead bodies. Twenty years ago, the place was a bushy jungle, and people won't come here because they would dread meeting with ghosts.

In last 18-20 years, the area surrounding the temple has been turned into agricultural land due to the availability of ground water. Even after improvements in irrigation and agricultural inputs, one side of the temple, as I could see, remained uncultivated and marshy. Thus, improvements in irrigation and application of Green Revolution technologies had a significant effect on the production relationships in the villages. Next, I will give a brief sketch of the landholding pattern and caste relationships in Singur because that is the key to

the sentiments and mentalities of villagers around land. The latter is crucial to comprehend the self-understanding of the villagers.

Social Field and the Complex Pattern of Land-Relations

Making an Entry into the Social Field: Tea Stall and the *Macha*.

My first entry into the village community started at a tea-stall (with the sign board "TATA-Singur") located right beside the highway that connects Calcutta and Delhi. The tea-stall was also right next to the agricultural fields that would be acquired by the government. From the tea-stall, I could see the fields full of tall jute stems. The day-laborers were cleaning the jute and drying it in a small tank, right behind the stall. Mukta Sahana, a landless local young man in his thirties, is the owner of the tea stall that is just a small structure made of wood and tin. Right beside the stall is a shack made of bamboo sticks and a polythene cover, the place where peasants, day laborers and villagers gather to escape the sweltering summer heat and to take a break from the drudgery of monotonous agricultural work. The landowning small farmers come to wait in the shade to watch their male laborers do the most taxing work of rinsing the wet jute fiber and drying it. The tea-stall and also the *macha* (which is a resting place made of bamboo and hay) are important social spaces because they define the boundaries of village life. The small supervisory landholders, local youth, and political leaders who can afford leisure time congregate at the tea-shops or the

machas. The latter were mostly from the *Mahisya* or *Goala* castes. The day laborers come to the tea-shops to eat, but they do not sit on the benches, they squat on the floor to eat or gossip. The *machas*, located inside the villages, are reserved for local small landholders. Thus, the tea-stall and the *machas* are important spaces for free discussion, but they also exclude a section who are either migrant or local landless poor belonging mostly to scheduled caste or scheduled tribes.

The tea-stall has turned itself into a major meeting point for discussion and information dissemination about the *sorkari* (state government's) threat that villagers of various kinds have started perceiving. Manab Panja, a middle aged small landowning peasant, and a *Mahisya*,³⁵ first tried to make sure whether I am a *sorkari* person. My assertion that I am a student and his reading of my non-*sorkari* but urban attire (t-shirt and trousers) convinced him that I am not a *sorkari* person. "We think that the government is acting whimsically" –he said. "This stretch that you can see over there (he points out the vast stretch right behind the tea stall) grows three crops every year –jute, rice-paddy, and potato. This aside, we grow vegetables such as *potol*,³⁶ chillies and tomatoes.

Moreover, they (government) claim that this is submerged land that grows only one crop. They say that we do not even grow the October rice. This is a blatant lie. You can for yourself see that this field of ours (points to the field

³⁵ *Mahisya* is the name of the caste to which he belongs. *Mahisyas* along with *goalas* form the middle caste in rural West Bengal. The middle castes are the primary beneficiaries of the land redistribution and improvements in agriculture.

³⁶ *Potol* is a kind of green vegetable

that falls within his village, Gopalnagar) has one *sorkari* (deep-tubewell), and there are so many *private minis* (submersible tube-wells that draw underground water) operating here." Mukta interjected and said, "talk about *boudi* (sister-in-law Manab's wife)." By this time, Manab's agitated face shows a broad smile. Mukta continued, "His wife is the local Trinamul³⁷ (the main opposition part in the state) leader." Manab added with pride, "Yes, she is a member of the local governing body (*Panchayat*)." Manab said, "My father was a school teacher and a member of the M-party [Marxist party or the CPI (M)]. However, I asked my wife to join the Trinamul." I asked, "Why did you ask her to join Trinamul?" Manab said that he had run into a dispute with his cousins regarding share of landholding. The cousins sought the help of the local Marxist party and threatened Manab.

Manab went to the main adversary of the Marxist party in the village to Trinamul Congress for help. Manab's cousins had gotten jobs at the government schools with the help of the party. Manab did not have a college degree, but he wanted his younger brother, who had a degree, to get a job in the school, but the Marxist party did not help his younger brother get the job. The younger brother left the village for work elsewhere. Thus, the disputes with cousins led Manab to gradually shift his loyalties to the Trinamul Congress. Manab said that the *Panchayat* was not informed about the take-over. "There was hardly any

³⁷ Trinamul Congress is a party that broke away from the Congress party that forms the government at the federal level currently. Trinamul is also an ally of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

discussion in the *Panchayat*. We are not going to give up our land. And the government has not said how much they are going to sell the land for to the Tatas.” Manab placed his *gamcha* (towel) on his left shoulder and prepared to leave — “I have to give directions to the laborers.” Before he left he said:

What are we going to do if the land is gone? The money that we are going to receive is not going to last long. I will use it up drinking. They (the government) think farming is of no use.³⁸ If we do not produce crops, what are the lorries (trucks) and vans going to carry? We produce the *rasad* (the foundation or the juice of life) based on which you have the modern civilization. Industries are required but not by killing agriculture. We also employ people here. Agriculture is also an industry (Personal interview, September 2006).

In the Manab’s comment, one can discern the aspect of self-understanding among small landholders that I highlighted in the last chapter. Manab, the comment shows, thought of farming and agriculture as an activity that constitutes the very substance of society or the social whole.

Manab and his wife Sushma were both active workers of the Trinamul Congress party (literally translated grassroots Congress). A section of the local Trinamul, which includes its local member of the legislative assembly, was opposing the government move tooth and nail. While Mukta listened to Manab quietly, Mukta had a different perspective that I discuss next. Mukta was also *Mahisya* like Manab, and he also came from a small landholding family, but his share of the landholding was so small that he decided to sell his plot.

³⁸ Referring to the government and party slogan “agriculture is our base, industry our future.”

From the Perspective of a Landless Mahisya: Mukta's story

Mukta invited me to have lunch with him and promised me that he would look for a place where I could stay. Mukta stays in Sahanapara. The village neighborhoods are named after the surnames of its residents. For example, the village of Gopalnagar has neighborhoods of *Sahana-para*, *Kolay-para*, *Sau-para*, *Ghosh-para*, *Bamun* (Brahman)-*para*, and *Kayat*(Kayastha)-*para*. *Para* means neighborhood. *Sahana*, *Kolay*, and *Sau* are *Mahisya* surnames. The houses were mostly built of brick and concrete. Shades made of bamboo and hay housed the cattle. While walking through the neighborhoods, one gets a sense of how party affiliations change across neighborhoods. Some neighborhoods had buildings and shop walls littered with anti-government posters accusing the Marxist chief minister of brokering the land deal with the Tatas. Other neighborhoods have no such posters. Later, I came to know that *Kolaypara* and *Ghoshpara* are Trinamul Congress strongholds, while *Shahanapara* and *Saupara* are CPM supporters. *Bamun*³⁹ and *Kayatparas* are loyal to the Congress party. However, the neighborhoods also have dissenting families and households that do not follow the "official" neighborhood party-line. Mukta and I entered an underpass below the four-lane highway that dissects the Gopalnagar village into two parts.

The building of the highway not only took land from the villagers back in

³⁹ Bamun means Brahman. Kayat means Kayasthas. In the caste hierarchy the Kayastha comes right after Brahmans.

The Sahana, Kolay, and Sau are Mahisyas (middle castes). The Ghoshes are Goalas (middle caste).

the 1960's, the compensations that were paid could not be claimed by many villagers because their papers were not ready. "In the pre-land reform years, the smaller landowners were not as savvy as they are now," Mukta said. Mukta's deceased father had land there, but they could not prove and collect the compensation due to the lack of proper paperwork. However, the highway (also called the Golden Quadrilateral⁴⁰), which was built much later, created a barrier that the villagers on both sides would have to cross and negotiate the speeding trucks and vehicles.

The under-pass was built for the convenience of villagers. Initially, the engineers had planned not to build any underpass. As the highway was being built by the Bharatiya Janata Party government at the center, the local Marxist party members demanded an underpass be built and forced the National Highway Authority India to stop the work. A Calcutta newspaper reported in December of 2004: "While the Marxiist Chief Minister sermonizes about attracting investment and developing infrastructure, his party men have been instigating residents of Singur in Hooghly to thwart progress of the key Golden Quadrilateral project."⁴¹ Thus, land was being acquired in the Singur for many years. Such acquisitions also led to loss of farm land and created inconveniences for the villagers.

⁴⁰ Golden Quadrilateral connects four major cities of India.

⁴¹ The Statesman, 7th December 2004.

I asked Mukta, “so why have you put up the signboard with the name of “Tata” on it?” Mukta smiled and said:

I am illiterate but my wife has studied till the 9th grade. She gave me the idea. She wrote the text on a piece of paper and I just copied it on a big tin board. The local activists came to me and threatened me with dire consequences if I continue to use it. However, I asked them which parties are you from. Look, I do not have any party. Whichever parties you come from, tell me; I will go to the other party that opposes you. Don’t you see Tata boards in railway stations and at other important crossings and junctions; why don’t pull them off first? (Personal interview September, 2006)

The plot on which Mukta’s stall stands belongs to the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI). Mukta’s stall has a paralegal status. While one can legally encroach on the NHAI territory to build shops and stalls, the extension, i.e. the shade and the sitting arrangement was illegal. However, with local support from members of all the political parties, Mukta could occupy the extra yard. However, he said, “For god’s sake that extra-yard is *sorkari* land; had it belonged to the landed people (meaning small landholders, such as Manab), I could not have had my stall there.” Three or four years ago, Mukta had decided to grow seeds for rice-paddy and vegetables in that miniscule plot. He had started taking water from the government tube-well that provides water to the fields of the small landholding farmers. However, the landholders did not allow him to do that. They told him: “You do not have a place to urinate here, how you can to use the water.” As Mukta did not own any plot in that field, the small

landholders did not allow him to use the water from the public or government tube-well. The comment meant that the field and the water from the government tubewell were not for public use⁴², but they were only for the land owners.

Mukta had been to a school but could not afford to study beyond the fourth grade. Earlier, he would go to different states of India to work as a casual laborer. He had been to the northern state of Uttar Pradesh and to Bangladesh. However, traveling to other places for work kept him away from his family most of the time, and he could not look after his parents. He had to come back and settle down. He got married and had two daughters who went to school. He is the sole earning member of a family of five that does not have any land. Mukta also worked as laborer when the highway was built. The wages were low and they had to work very hard during the day. Towards the evening, he did not have energy left to do anything else. The small teashop that he had gives him less money but a lot of time to engage in petty trade in cigarettes and puffed rice. However, his debts add up to 8000 rupees (\$200 approximately).

Initially, Mukta was ambivalent about the Tata project. Seeing most of the landed neighbors opposing the takeover, he enjoyed the debates and arguments favoring and disfavoring the acquisition. He did not have a stake, but he knew the factory would bring more people and he would have good business at his tea-shop. Later, Mukta would be recruited as worker at the factory-site. He would work in the day and manage his tea-stall in the evening. He had said,

⁴² In a public place one could urinate.

“Well when this road was built some like us lost land but others gained. Now, too, some will loose and others like me will gain.” The road or the highway brought wholesalers of rice and vegetables in greater numbers. The small landholders got a better price for their crops because of the highway.

The landowners who would come to Mukta’s tea-stall were suspicious of him. They would think of him as an opportunist. However, the small landowners used his stall as a meeting point to discuss local politics. Saving the land from being acquired by the government had become a village affair. The women of small landowning farmers’ households and landless households were marching in protest, obstructing the entry of the district magistrate. The men were mostly discussing and strategizing the moves. One of the small landowning farmers compared the life of the small landholders with one who does government service. “The service holder gets a pension, but the farmer has the land. You can get a steady income from land without having to work. I think a better price could be negotiated. We can keep the money at the bank or buy government bonds.”⁴³ The moment he said this, other local politician-activist-small landholders, such as Manab Panja, Loknath Si, and Sambhu Si raised their voices and started abusing him and said: “The government workers do not work, but we are farmers (*chasi*); we go to the field everyday.”⁴⁴

Landholding Pattern and Production Relationships

⁴³ Personal interview December 2006.

⁴⁴ Personal interview December 2006.

The average land holding size of the acquired plot reflects the dwindling holding size of small landholding farmers in West Bengal in general. One thousand acres of land had been acquired and the number of official claimants in whose names compensation checks had been issued by the state government was 12000. The average landholding size came to 1/12 of an acre, which if converted to local measure, *bigha*, the average holding size would be 1/4th of a *bigha* and approximately 4 *kattahs*. The equality of the distribution was a result of the redistributive land reforms program of the Left Front government. After coming to power for the first time in 1977, the government had distributed ceiling surplus land among the erstwhile sharecroppers and the landless laborers. The ceiling was set at 25 acres and nobody could own more than 25 acres of land. Most of the small landholders who received land belong to *Mahisya* and *Goala* middle castes. The ceiling surplus land was mostly taken away from absentee landlords belonging to the Brahman and Kayastha upper castes.

In the last 30 years, the political power of the Brahman and Kayastha has been on the wane. The *Mahisyas* and *Goalas* have mostly come to dominate village politics. While possession of land is an index of rural prestige and power, inter-household and intra-household division of land into smaller plots has only brought a modicum of prosperity to the farmer households of *Mahisya* and *Goala*. Initial prosperity, acquisition of urban cultural practices, such as education and progressively poor returns from farming have led to viewing farming practices as backward. They have often ventured out into non-farm professions of

teaching, petty business, jewelry work, and government service. Young men, and in many cases women, pursue higher education in areas, such as commerce, science, and humanities in district colleges. However, the possibility of employment with a humanities or commerce degree has been decreasing for quite some time. Hence dependence on land remains strong. Nonetheless, a change can be noted in the farming culture as more and younger *Mahisyas* and *Goalas* tend to avoid going to the field altogether.

Farming in Singur was practiced in three different ways. First, the landowner did the farming himself by employing laborers, who are local landless and migrant men and women, or simply supervised the laborers. In the case of supervisory farming the small landowner would simply give directions and he himself would not do any physical work in the field. Second, the *bargadar* or the sharecropper did the farming and gave 25 percent of the produce to the landowner. Third, the landowner leased out the land to a person who would farm it and give a fixed amount of money every season to the landowner.

Among the *Mahisyas* and *Goalas*, the tendency to farm one's own field was on the decline. A few among them, especially younger individuals, would not even supervise farming. Moreover, there was a strict division of labor among the landowning farmers and the daily laborers. The daily laborers usually did the most labor-intensive part of the work, such as the harvesting and tying the paddy in the field and cleaning and drying the jute or picking potatoes up from the field. The wages of the laborers varied daily depending on the demand and

supply of labor. Most of the laborers were not aware of the daily minimum wage.⁴⁵ The second form of farming is mostly practiced by the *Mahisya* sharecroppers who cultivate the land of the upper-caste landowners. In such cases, the sharecroppers have registered access to the land that they cultivate. They may not be evicted at the will of the landowner, but they must share 25 % of the produce with the landowner. The registration also entitles the sharecroppers to have 25% of the amount for which the plot for which he is registered is sold. The legal framework, which mostly came into effect after the Left Front government was voted to power in 1977, has favored the sharecropper rather than landowner. Many of the current *Mahisya* and *Goala* landowners were had been sharecroppers.⁴⁶ Many of the *Mahisya* and *Goala* small landholders bought land from the big landowners for whom they worked as sharecroppers. They hardly allowed the landless laborers to enjoy the same benefits that they enjoyed as sharecroppers. Emergence of the third form of farming, where the small landowner leased out the land to a person who would farm it and give a fixed amount of money every season to the landowner, was partly due to this latter reason. The lessee does not enjoy the rights that rights of a sharecropper although he performs the role of a sharecropper vis-à-vis the small landowner.

The *Mahisya* and *Goala* land owners leased out land to the local landless who

⁴⁵ I interviewed many laborers, who said they were not aware of the minimum wage. Some, however, said that they could not negotiate a better wage because they did not have a labor union like other laborers usually have in other villages.

⁴⁶ Transfer of land from big to small landowners is unique to West Bengal (will give citation later).

belonged to lower castes or are Muslims or migrant indigenous people who had settled in the village fringes. Occasionally, lessor and lessee may both belong to the same *Mahisya* or *Goala* caste. The principle of lease farming was that the lessee had to pay a fixed amount annually to the land owner. If he could not pay that amount or someone else offered to pay more than that, the next year, the lease may pass on to another person. These lease agreements were mostly informal and were based on word of mouth. Legally, the lessees and also the laborers who regularly work in the fields had the right to register themselves as sharecroppers. However, the landless individuals' attempts to register themselves as sharecroppers were usually considered to be distrustful or *beimani* by the small landholders.⁴⁷

For a landless lessee, following a legal course, i.e. registering himself or herself as a sharecropper required connections with the local members of the political parties. These local party members, who are themselves small landholding supervisory farmers, of the ruling Marxist party or the opposition party, would mostly look after the interests of the small landholders. Moreover, if a landless lower caste individual attempted to take a legal course, it could jeopardize that individual's multiple ways of depending on the landholding families who may provide food and also employment in the farms or in the

⁴⁷ This kind of agreement led to overexploitation of land because the lessee would try to maximize the output from the land.

households as domestic servants. Thus, an “implicit⁴⁸ understanding” between the small landholders and the state, political parties and local *panchayats* was the key to the access to the land and general dominance for the small landholders.

The implicit understanding, which involves the state, the regime, political parties, and the small landholders, limits the access of the landless to land and protects the interests of the small landholders. Registration as sharecroppers would give them permanent access to the land that they cultivate. Registration as a sharecropper also entitles one to 25% of the selling price of the plot if the plot is sold by the landowner to somebody else.

In terms of the above description, I have tried to give a sketch of the social field, its changing character, and the tension and divisions within it. Agricultural improvements have contributed to the growing prosperity of the small landholders who have gradually intensified agriculture. I have shown in the preceding paragraphs that small landholders are supervisory farmers and depend on the labor of the local landless. Within the small landholding caste of Mahisya and Goalas, there were many tensions regarding division of plots, as I have shown in the case of Manab. The foregoing also shows that subdivision of plots has also rendered many *Mahisyas* like Mukta landless or near landless. In the next section, I will further show the relationship between the state and the small landholders in terms of what I call the implicit understanding between the

⁴⁸ I call this implicit because the practice was informal and involved no written contracts. However, simply calling it informal does not describe the relationship properly. The immorality of the practices or the relationship was never questioned and the understanding remained implicit.

small landholders and the state.

Implicit Understanding between the State and the Small Landholders

As I have said earlier, the changing agricultural landscape led to controversies regarding the terrain and the character of the land that would be acquired. Due to the improvements in irrigation, increased agricultural production had mostly taken place during the rule of the Marxist government. However, why did the government not update the land records when the uses of some of the land, especially wetlands, changed to arable? Answering this question helps to understand what I call the implicit and non-juridical relationship between the small landholders and the regime or the state.

For the purposes of revenue collection, land in India is classified into three types namely, *sukha*, *sunā*, and *sali*.⁴⁹ Derived from the Persian, the terms are remnants of pre-British Muslim administrative jargon. *Sunā* means immensely fertile, multicropped, and well-irrigated land; *sukha* is just the opposite and *sali* stands for single crop marshy land. The price (exchange value) of land tends to vary according to this classification—*sunā* being the most expensive and *sukha* the least. The government collects an annual tax depending on the above mentioned soil quality of the land.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Interviews with villagers and bureaucrats between November 2006 and February 2007

⁵⁰ Apart from this, the small landholders whose land falls under a government deep-tubewell area had to pay water taxes.⁵⁰ Tendency to default on water tax was very high. The water tax was primarily collected to operate and maintain the government deep-tube wells, and local

Many small landholding villagers would complain that *sarkar* or the government was giving them the *Sali* price for *Suna* land because the land records have not been updated as conditions changed with Green Revolution. I did not get any satisfactory answers in the villages to the question: Why was the record was not updated? Logically, updating of the record would allow the government to raise more revenue. Why would the government lose out on revenue? How exactly are the records updated? Is it because of bureaucratic lethargy?

With these questions in mind, I visited the land bureaucrats. Lower level bureaucrats told me that updating records, i.e., the change from *sali* to *suna*, would require at least three visits every year. The bureaucrats did not usually visit the villages so often. Moreover, the classification that they did was mostly based on hearsay. The bureaucrats mainly asked the small-landholding farmers about the character of the land. To reduce taxes, small land holding farmers usually said that their plots are *sali* or single cropped even though they were capable of growing three crops every year. Recognizing this problem, the government agency⁵¹ that acquired the land for the factory had asked the local member of the Legislative Assembly,⁵² who was a leader of the opposition party,

bureaucrats do not have much power to deprive the defaulting small landholders of water from the pump or tubewell.

⁵¹ West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation.

⁵² MLA: Member of the legislative assembly. The legislative assembly is the place where representatives from all around the state get elected every five years. the legislative assembly is the state or the provincial legislature. This is different from the Indian parliament which is the legislature at the federal or central scale. Separate elections are held to elect representatives to

Trinamul Congress, to point out which plots were *sali* and which were *sunā*, and promised that compensation would be paid accordingly⁵³ without rechecking whether his report was true or false. However, he refused to yield because doing that would mean giving in to the government's claim that land acquisition can be compensated.

Keeping the land records unchanged for the benefit of the small landholders is another manifestation of what I have identified as an implicit and non-juridical understanding between the small landholders and the regime. In the last chapter, I gave another example of the same "implicit understanding" when I revealed how the Marxist regime targeted the land of the small landholders less, for implementing land redistribution. Such implicit understanding is also manifested when the Marxist party does not make the agricultural laborers aware of their fair wages in Singur because that will raise the cost of production for the small landholders.

Crisis in Self-understanding and in the Implicit Understanding

Such implicit understanding with the regime and the political parties notwithstanding, dominance of the small landholders, who are more or less rentier groups, is on the wane. The small landholders are steadily becoming poorer because of subdivision of the land and the inability of the farm sector to generate enough employment and wages. Such impoverishment is also

these elected bodies. Constituencies for elected representatives to the Indian parliament are larger than the constituencies for the state assembly. However, they are not mutually exclusive.

⁵³ Personal interview with the Member of Legislative Assembly (West Bengal)

threatening the self-image and self understanding of the small landholders who think of themselves as *moddhobittyo* (or middle class), “developed” and deserving of or entitled to “improvement.” This also jeopardizes the social position of the small landholders vis-à-vis the landless agricultural laborers over whom they boss.

The middle caste small landholders who think of themselves as “*moddhobitya*” or middle-class, hardworking, and teetotalers construct their *chasi* identities in opposition to the landless agricultural workers, who they think are lazy and drunkards and also “underdeveloped.” The usual complaint was that the landless or the *majurs* could neither control nor govern themselves nor could they govern their animals, such as goats that regularly come and eat crops in the fields of the small landholders.

The crisis in self-understanding and self image put a strain on the existing implicit understanding between the small landholders and the regime that is based on land redistribution and subsidies for agriculture. A portion of these *Mahisyas* and *Goalas* and small landholding villagers have emerged as small and medium entrepreneurs. The small and medium businesses include brick kilns, jewelry workshops, construction work, local and long distance transport companies, and rice mills. The agricultural small landholding *Mahisyas* and *Goalas*, who benefited from land reforms and enjoyed agricultural subsidies, formed the traditional base of the Marxist party. Youngsters and the newly emerging entrepreneurs tend to side mostly with the main opposition party,

Trinamul Congress, which is actually an ally of the liberalizing parties at the central scale.

In this respect, Barbara Harris-White's (2008:257) comment on West Bengal is apt. Harris-White observes that in West Bengal, until recently, petty commercial capital has not been encouraged to accumulate; quite the reverse. Now the dynamics of accumulation are extending the mass of petty trade, but unaccompanied by a development project for them. An "unholy" and to date politically un-articulated alliance between a mass of small peasant/petty traders, transporters, and processors on the one hand, and liberalisers at the Centre on the other, Harris-White remarked, is providing a theoretically and politically uncomfortable challenge to the Marxist regime. Thus, in Singur, the Marxist regime faced an uncomfortable challenge from the new rural small and medium entrepreneurs and the young men and women who would like to work in the nonagricultural sector. The new generation could not be contained or won over simply by the usual and dominant governmental practices that entail redistribution of land and subsidizing agriculture (which I call the land based governmentality). Ironically, the three hundred small and medium local entrepreneurs who supplied labor and materials to the Tata factory in Singur were mostly supporters of the main opposition party, Trinamul Congress, which was opposing land acquisition.

Types of Workers	Number of Workers	Percentage to total worker
Cultivators	14,973	15.9
Agricultural laborers (<i>majurs</i>)	15,584	16.6
Household Industry Workers	8,788	9.4
Other Workers	54,622	58.1

Table 1. Percentage of distribution of population according to different categories of workers and non-workers in the Singur block. Source: Census of India, 2001. The census data records the small landholding individuals as "cultivators." According Dipankar Gupta (2008) dependence on agriculture for work is over-reported in the Indian census.

Thus, it is not only the regime that seeks to redefine the relationship between itself and the small landholding villagers, but also the small landholders were developing new kinds of expectations from the regime and the state. The new expectations and demands for non-farm employment are based on the self-image and self-understanding that was developed during the land reform years but can no longer be maintained unless the state is industrialized.⁵⁴ The small landholders perceive what is good and bad for them and which action of the government is justified and unjustified from this perspective of their self-image and identities. Hence, I call this relationship between the regime and the small landholders a moral economy. Unlike the moral economy, described by James Scott (1976), which is based on a subsistence ethic developed over a long period of time, this implicit relationship or understanding between the state and its

⁵⁴ Manufacturing industrialization.

subjects (in this case the small landholders) is based not simply on a subsistence ethic or “just prices.” The ethical element is based also on how to maintain distinctions and how to be socially mobile with the help of the state. Thus, the demands on the state or the regime go beyond simple agricultural subsidies or subsistence. Anthropologist Marc Edelman (2005: 67) calls this kind of moral economy the “new rural moral economies.”

The New Rural Moral Economy

To illustrate this new rural moral economy further I will write about my interaction with a young man from a small landholding family, Mahesh Panja, at Mukta’s tea shop where I used to have lunch. Mahesh would come there everyday around 12 noon. That was the time when he used to get a lunch break from a chemical factory where he worked. Incidentally, the factory was located in a plot diagonally opposite to Mukta’s tea shop and the factory site was once fertile and multi-crop agricultural land. Whenever Mahesh came, his hands and faces were covered with black soot. Mukta would ask Mahesh if his father was giving up land for the automobile factory. Mahesh knew how to repair automobiles and hoped to get a job if his father agreed to give up land. However, his father did not agree to give land and was protesting against land acquisition. I asked Mahesh, “Why do you go to work in the factory. You could have worked in the land.” Mahesh replied, “There are laborers to work in the land. Why should I work in land? And if Tata company can have so many factories, why cannot I have at least two motorbikes? My mother would like to watch television

for which you need to pay monthly bills for cable channels. And there are so many other needs. Income from land is not enough.” Mukta interjected and asked Mahesh about his plans for marriage. Mahesh continued, “I have to bring a wife” (*bou ante hobe*). Women, these days, are too demanding; they ask for so many things—power, jewelry, *saree*, and so on.” I asked him, “Aren’t you getting dowry from your father-in-law.” Mukta smiled at my question and said, “I am going for a love marriage.”

Self-Understanding and a Feeling of “Disconnect”

In addition to the new rural moral economy, the broader political and economic context of decline of industries in West Bengal and fast industrialization of other parts of India strengthens implicit claims, expectations and demands for non-farm employment. I have already shown how the investment geography of India shapes the spread of the industrial situation in West Bengal in the introduction. Here, I will demonstrate how the feeling of disconnect is felt in the villages.

In response to my interviews, many older villagers would say that in their time, jobs or work were readily available in their district, but now youngsters must leave their families to go to other provinces. My interactions with 70 small landholding families revealed that at least one young member from each of these households stays and works in cities outside the province. This absence is the

concrete result of such a “disconnect.” To further illustrate the feeling of “disconnect,” I write about my interaction with a young villager below.

Names of the Villages	No. of households interviewed	Average number of members in each household	Average No. of members staying and working outside the province
Gopalnagar	28	5	2
Bajemelia	19	4	3
Beraberi	23	4	2

Table 2. Average number of members and average number of members staying or working outside the province.

Many young men from the small landholding households migrate to Jaipur, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Delhi and Madras, and even to Dubai to work at jewelry workshops. Out 70 households that I interviewed during my field work period in different villages, I found every household has at least one young male member staying in other provinces or abroad. Shibben Shi, a local youth in Gopalnagar village also worked as an insurance agent to this diaspora. Most of the year, he travels among various Indian cities to serve his dispersed clientele. Few of the young men who migrate settle down at the places where they work. They usually return to their villages to settle down and invest their money in other businesses, or they set up jewelry workshops. I met a couple of them who were visiting their family temporarily.

One morning as I sat at a tea-stall, I noticed five young men chatting among themselves. They were not wearing what people usually wore in the

village i.e. *lungi* or *dhoti*.⁵⁵ They were wearing shirts tucked inside their cotton trousers. While two of them were in slippers, the other three were in sneakers. They stood out in sharp contrast to other elderly customers who wore *lungi* and were barefooted. The tea-stall owner, Shyam-*da* or Shyam Sahana asked one of them, “Madhav, when are you returning to Delhi?” Madhav replied that he has to return to Delhi very soon, but he is worried that the government would take up land. He did not want his father to sell the land that his family bought with the money that he had sent from his income in Delhi as a jewelry worker.

Madhav belongs to a small landholding household. His immediate and extended family owned land in the area. Recently, they acquired more land along the highway because Madhav and his brother had been earning enough cash from their work in Delhi and Mumbai. If the government had not taken the land, Madhav and his brother would have set up a hotel and a restaurant there. Madhav had gone to school till the tenth grade and after that he dropped out to train himself as jewelry worker. I asked Madhav, “Why did you drop out of school.” Madhav replied, “Well, I did not do well in *Madhyamik* (Board exams). My father and uncles suggested that I learn some skills so that I can earn money on my own (*swadhinbabhe*).”

Madhav’s father and uncles used to work in a factory nearby, but they lost their jobs because the factory was shut due to labor trouble. They could have found Madhav a job in the factory, but the factory never reopened and was

⁵⁵ Piece of cloth to cover the lower part of the body (from the waist to the knees).

shifted out of the province. Since then, Madhav's father had been working at the local grocery store apart from supervising the laborers in his field. The younger uncle, who had migrated to Delhi, asked Madhav to join him there to get trained as a jewelry worker. Madhav thought that education after the 10th or 12th grade is meaningless if one does not study science, medicine, or management. Science and medicine or other science disciplines are meant only for the talented. "MA or BA degrees in History, Geography, Bengali, or Commerce do not give you jobs," Madhav said.

He asked me, "What are you going to do with an Anthropology degree? Is Anthropology a science subject?" Before I could answer his questions, Madhav started complaining about the Left government. "They have shut all the factories around here. If you go to Delhi or Mumbai you can see how much you can earn. *Ekhane to kichui nei*. There is nothing here. They (refers to the Left government) had even stopped teaching English in schools." I knew that Kolkata or Calcutta, the nearest city and the provincial capital, also has many jewelry companies. Therefore, I asked Madhav why he is not planning to look for work in Calcutta. "If I had a job in Kolkata, that would have been very good. But compared to Mumbai and Delhi, Kolkata is a *second-class* city. Wage rates (*majuri*) are very low."

However, Madhav thought his family had an emotional attachment to the land they own and the land they bought later. He thought that he would not have "developed" himself if his family had not gotten rights and access to land

during the land redistribution. He could migrate to Delhi and could spend the initial years because his father would support him from whatever he earned from land. “We cannot think about ourselves without land (*Jomi*). Without land we will be like those *scheduled castes*.”⁵⁶ For the factory, Madhav thought, the government could take land from other places close by. “They could go to *Diara* field.” *Diara* was close by and also was a not primarily agricultural, but it was also used by the landless laborers to graze goats. The government was not acquiring the field not because it wanted to save the landless but because the automaker chose the spot in Singur.

Limitations of Land-Based Governmentality and Contradiction in Small Landholder Subjectivity

To understand the contradictions in small landholders subjectivity, I will begin with a description of my interaction with a small landholding villager and his son. I used to chat with Bhulu Kolay, a Mahisya small landholding villager, who sat under the shade of a tree as laborers (*majurs*) worked in his fields. Bhulu-da (honorific for big brother) had worked in a pipe manufacturing factory in the nearby town of Howrah. He lost his job when the factory was shut down. Below, I quote from Bhulu Kolay’s responses to my interviews.

⁵⁶ “Scheduled caste” refers to landless lower castes or tribals. Scheduled caste is an official designation for the purposes of affirmative action but also used colloquially to refer to lower castes.

The left leaders of today do not know what land means (mulya ki) to us chashis(farmers/peasants)” he said and continued “We owe our land to the Left government but now it seems the leaders have turned whimsical and they have forgotten what land means to us. I could not have brought my children up if I had not owned that piece of land that the government wants to acquire. I could marry my daughter off to a school teacher because I could pay for her dowry by selling a portion of my holding. Without the plot, I am like those laborers (majurs) over there. (Personal Interview, October 2006)

I never saw Bhulu Kolay’s elder son during the day. He worked as a salesman and would come back from work in the evening. Every now and then, I would see Bhulu Kolay’s younger son Hemanta, a very good friend of mine. However, I would never see him around their house for more than thirty minutes at a stretch. He would vanish from the sight and would reappear and said that he had to visit his “clients.” His “clients” are the neighbors and other small landholding villagers to whom he sells the insurance policies of various private insurance companies. Hemanta would ask me to be his “client.” “There are very good offers, he would say, from companies like Aviva and Tata AIG. I asked him “Aren’t you fighting against the building of Tata factory here? How come you are selling Tata’s insurance policy.” Hemanta replied that “What can be done, I have to ‘improve’ (or ‘develop’) myself” (amake to jibone unnati korte hobe).

Hemanta’s remark on *unnati* or development and Mahesh’s remark on the need to consume more are representative responses of the village youngsters of small landholding families and show how self-understandings are changing.

However, these self understandings are not completely different from what they were twenty or thirty years ago. These self-images and understandings are a byproduct of changes brought about by land reforms and other improvements in agriculture. In the preceding chapter on “peasants,” I have written about the historical context of the emergence of this kind of subjectivity. This kind of subjectivity is based on a particular way in which small landholding villagers came to see themselves in their relationship with the state and with the landless villagers.

Thus, the self-understanding or the subjectivity of the villagers has two aspects. One aspect is how they see themselves with respect to landownership and think about their careers and futures. Another closely related aspect is that this self-understanding is based on an expectation from the state or the regime. This expectation can also be seen in terms of an implicit understanding (meaning an implicit deal) between the state or the regime and the small landholders, which is evident in the agrarian relations in Singur about which I have written above. Thus, self-understanding in the two senses of the term, “understanding,” i.e. as knowing oneself and also an understanding or an implicit deal (a non-judicial relationship or a relationship that goes beyond formal citizenship claims) between the small landholders and the regime form the core of the moral economy that binds the Marxist regime with the small landholders. This is the key to the land based governmentality of the Marxist regime.

According to Graham Burchell (1991:119), the many are often governed by one or by a few who “know how to conduct them.” The people who are governed are not passive objects of physical determination. Government presupposes and requires the activity and freedom of the governed. This shows that there is a problem of subjectivity and self-understanding in politics. Thus, to govern, the regime or the state must cultivate and promote and also draw upon a particular kind of self-understanding. In the previous chapter, I have shown how a self-understanding based on chashi or peasant identity was promoted through Left politics and later through land redistribution. Such self-understanding was mobilized to rule and win elections by the Left government for a last thirty years. However, the self-understanding of the small landholders is in crisis due to various reasons, such as dwindling sizes of plot and unavailability of non-farm employment. The government’s acquisition of small landholders’ land in Singur was, however, a challenge to the basic self-image or self-understanding based on ownership of land. The value the small landholders attach to their self-image and self-understanding got deeply affected because it impinged on the basic relation the small landholding groups and the individuals had among themselves and with the state or the regime. This heightened the crisis that the small landholders were already undergoing. A line of conflict is found to pass, in such cases, Burchell (1991:119) suggests, not just between distinct subjects but through the individual person. It is in these situations, Vaclav Havel says, that individuals may be led to resist or revolt or protest.

To explore the contradictory subjectivities and tensions among villagers further, I will present small vignettes. The vignettes are named after the respondents.

Liakat Mallik

Liakat Mallik of Joymollah village was a landless laborer who had been farming the land of Goala Ghosh's for last five or six years. I came to know about Liakat through his wife whom I met while interviewing agitated villagers in Dobandhi and Joymollah. The landless laborers were both tense and flustered because they stood to lose access to the land that they had been cultivating for the last five or six years. With such access, they did not have to leave their village for regular employment. While the registered sharecroppers were offered 25% of the value of the plot that they farmed, the government had not announced any compensation for the landless laborers or the unregistered sharecroppers. According to the industry minister, if the government had announced any compensation for unrecorded sharecroppers that would have opened the flood gates because everybody would come and ask for money.

However, the situation on the ground was different. The middle caste-*Mahisya* and *Goala* landowner would not let the landless laborers register as sharecroppers. As I talked to Chitta Moitri, Putul Mali, Dilip, and two other women, they complained that for the last fourteen years the sharecropper registration had been stopped. The registration process is a two-step one. First,

the landless laborer goes to the BDO office or to a local branch office and applies for registration. Second, the inspector comes to verify whether the laborer actually cultivates the plot that he claims he cultivates. Inspectors ask the landless laborers working in the neighboring plots to attest to whether the landless person in question cultivates the plot. However, as most of the plots are owned by *Goala* and *Mahisya* families, the landless laborers can attest only at the risk of eviction or spoiling their relationship with the group small landowners. A woman who conspicuously had her head covered by her *saree* started grumbling about the small landowners. On further questioning, she asked me to talk to her husband, Liakat.

Hearing that the government is taking away the land and compensating the small landowners and registered sharecroppers, Liakat had gone to register his name as a sharecropper. However, the day the inspector came, Liakat went to the market area for some work. The small landowners, Jamini Ghosh and his relatives, stopped him at the marketplace and beat him up and asked him to sign a document saying that he does not work in their land. Incidentally, Jamini Ghosh and his sons are supporting and actively participating in the movement against land acquisition.

Kalyan

I met with Kalyan at Mukta's tea-shop. Kalyan used come to chat with other youngsters of his age. In the friendly debates with his village mates Kalyan would vociferously argue against acquisition of land. He would say "our land is

the factory for manufacturing food. We will manufacture food, and in the era of globalization we can buy motorcars from others.” Kalyan’s father and his uncles have more than 20 *bighas* of land. Kalyan’s brother is studying veterinary medicine. Kalyan’s father who used work with the Indian railways has bought Kalyan a motor tiller, but still Kalyan has been trying hard for a government service job. He has passed his Bachelor of Arts examination in history with a poor grade. He is desperately looking for a teaching job in a school.

I asked him, “So aren’t you concentrating on agriculture?” Kalyan smiled and replied, “Who will marry a farmer. These days people do not want to let their daughters marry into farmer households.” Although this is not true of all village households, in Kalyan’s status or caste group, marrying into a farmer household is not very prestigious. Kalyan, however, added that farming is not as high-status job as it is *Punjab, Haryana, or Uttar Pradesh*⁵⁷. I asked Kalyan, “If you get a job in government or the private sector, are you going to lose your interest in land?” Kalyan replied, “No, then I will be the proprietor.”

Mahadeb

Mahadeb Khanra mobilized public opinion against the government and also contacted the office of a transnational NGO fighting for food security and sovereignty. Mahadeb and his brothers also had approximately 12 *bighas* of land, part of which was facing the highway. One of Mahadeb’s brothers worked in a

⁵⁷ Although growing subdivision of land is a reality in the north Indian villages, the image of north India in the minds of the villagers is that it is agriculturally prosperous. (see Dipankar Gupta 2003, www.gdnet.org)

government concern in the nearby town. Mahadeb also formerly worked as a jeweler in Western India. He had planned to buy more plots along the highway with the money that he had saved. He thought of building shops, hotels or restaurants. However, the acquisition had jeopardized his dreams. Mahadeb expressed his grievance by saying, "I thought of becoming an industrialist but ended up as an activist."

At the *Macha*

The best place to talk to small landholding farmers was under the *macha*, a sitting and resting place made of bamboo and hay. The usual routine of the small landholders was to go to the field early in the morning to hire migrant laborers, give directions about work, and come back to the village and take rest under the shade. The land acquisition and associated politics dominated the discussion. The main concern for the male farmers was that the value of the land that they are being forced to give up will appreciate more in next ten or twenty years. Why would they give up land now? They must pay dowry for their daughters who will be married away.

Moreover, the government is paying the compensation money according to the Hindu inheritance law that pays equal amounts to the brothers and sisters. They would say sisters have left with the dowry; now why would they share the money with the sisters. They would say theirs is a "*sona*" land. Here the official meaning of Persian *sunā* would collapse into a similar sounding Bengali word: *sona*, meaning gold. They could have taken the *rupo* (silver) referring to the land

in other villages. Less fertile land was mostly used for grazing goats by the members of castes of landless laborers. The government was criticized less because of zealous attitude to bring investments but more for its past mistakes in encouraging trade union movements in the industries. Some would say that the Left government would shut down the factory that will be built on their land, and then they would have neither agriculture nor industry.

While land controversy raged in Singur, workers at a nearby Hindmotor automobile factory struck and demanded more wage and bonus. The parties and the leaders who led the farmers in Singur were also fighting for the cause of workers at the factory. However, the small farmers could not associate themselves with the trade union politics. Many of them would sympathize with the factory management and would say that the factory workers are not skilled enough. They would give the example of the laborers who work for them. The productivity in their fields declines, they would argue, because laborers were not skilled.

Mukta's uncle

Mukta's uncle owns 5 *bighas* of land, about 200 yards from the highway. Two or three years ago, he heard that a gas station will be constructed and many small landholders have sold land to a local entrepreneur. He realized that although the gas station would not extend to his land, it might block the passage of water from his plot. Thus, he understood he will not be able to drain out the water if there were a heavy shower. He went to everybody in the village to ask if

that could be stopped. As village *Panchayat* was run by the opposition party members, he specifically went to them to request whether anything could be done about the problem. However, his concerns fell on deaf ears. The gas station came up and his plot becomes submerged during heavy showers. He cursed the opposition party members and said that “they did not pay any heed to my problems, now they are destined to suffer.” Mukta’s uncle has also joined the labor force along with another 700 landless laborers or small landholding farmers who are helping the government set up the factory.

The Sau’s

Manik Sau and Nabin Sau are brothers. Apart from a lease on land to farm, they also pull rickshaws in the village. They have sent their sons to Mumbai to get trained as jewelers. Manik said he would not make much money from lease farming because the landowner would demand more money and if he could not provide the sum, the next year he would give the lease to others. However, they would grow their own rice paddy and would not have to depend on the market. Manik that said in lease farming, they would always try to minimize labor costs by working longer hours and they would also use more urea and potassium to raise the productivity of the land. They won’t care for the land much because if the production drops, they lose the contract the next year. The small landowner, on whose plot they work, had asked them to join the movement against the acquisition, so they joined reluctantly in the beginning.

A Poster

Most of the posters or wall graffiti against acquisition were put up at places frequented by villagers, such as on the walls of buildings facing the main road that goes inside the village or the tea shop. These posters or wall graffiti would appeal on behalf of the “village” or “peasants” or “farmers.” Parties that would put up the posters or write the graffiti would also put their names in them. However, I also encountered a strange poster in one of the villages by lanes. The poster was not under the sign of any known political outfit. It did not appeal on the behalf of “peasants.” The message in this small poster was an appeal to the particular caste of *Mahisyas*. It referred to and denounced the enthusiasm among the young *Mahisyas* who were reveling at news of a factory being set at their locality. The poster read like this:

The Tata factory that is coming up in Singur will actually “produce” (bring in) refugees (*bangal*). The educated local Mahisya boys, who are enthusiastic about the development, will not get anything out of it.

The poster reflects a fear about the influx of outsiders coming in and vitiating the village life. The poster, interestingly, was not addressed to the government but to the villagers who were in favor of the factory.

These ethnographic vignettes show that not only was there a tension between individuals but also the line of contradiction and conflict passed through individual subjects. The reasons for the tensions and contradictions are mostly competition, rivalry and conflict over deriving benefits from development and at the same time holding on to land. Thus, resistance of small

landholding villagers was not simply against the state or its policies but also against their co-equals and the villagers less powerful than they because there was an intense competition for material and non-material benefits that can be derived from development. These tensions between individual subjects and tensions within them get manifested in the paradox of vehement protest and counter-protests.

The individuals belonging to the small landholding group have twofold anxieties. They fear the fragmentation of land and losing land to the government projects. The former is addressed by a constant search for non-farm employment that the manufacturing sector or the service sector cannot generate. The latter is addressed through an appeal to the urban activists whose anti-capitalist ideological and political views the small landholding individuals only partially share.

Conclusion: What does Land Mean? Going Beyond a Productionist Analytic

Land, thus, is not just a plot for cultivation and self consumption of crops nor is it simply a plot to grow crops for sale in the market. These are the two usual poles along which a "peasant" is distinguished from a "farmer." In order to understand the protest against land acquisition, I propose, following Michael Kearney (1996: 161), one must go beyond this usual binary understanding of land based on the use value vs. the exchange value.

Ownership of land is an indicator of prestige, influence and security. Money earned by selling land also serves as dowry for the daughter. Land gives one the ability to boss over the landless laborer. Land is an object of dispute between brothers and sisters, neighbors and families, and also local members of the political party. The speculative value of land dependent on industrialization and urbanization also plays a part in rural social relationships. In short, possession of land is the core of the subjective identity that desires development and urban and non-farm employment and seeks to straddle the multiple and political worlds of difference. However, industries, development, and urbanization also require land. This is the basic contradiction that pervades the subjectivities of the villagers. The policies of the regime are a response to that, and so are the protests and counter protests.

The “exceptional” framework of understanding, proposed by Ong (2007) and the “accumulation by dispossession” trope, popularized by Harvey (2005) to understand the changes brought about by adoption of neoliberal policies, are powerful frameworks but in order to fully understand the paradoxes one must look at the complex identities and contradictions in subjectivities formed around ownership of land and within the dominant governmental techniques of the socialist regimes. A refusal to attend to such complexities produces a “romanticized resistance.” This romanticized resistance simply inverts the over-determined modernization-loving subjects that a high modernist Marxist regime presupposes to implement its industrialization policy. In place of over-

determined subjects, romanticized resistance of the Post-Developmentalists presupposes under-determined “peasant” subjects based on an essentialist understanding of culture. This essentialist view of culture emphasizes a natural unmediated or pre-mediated relationship between villagers, land and history rather than a politically and socially mediated relationship, based on identities, differences and aspirations.

The urban activists and local protestors try to construct a unified and homogenous voice out of the maze of different kinds of opinions, conflicts and contradictions on the basis of an “authentic” voice of the peasant who rejects industrialization, development and modernity. This strategy has proved to be very effective in challenging the hegemony of the Marxist regime, which has been identified as the “neoliberal left” similar to the Workers Party in Brazil. However, this construction of authenticity may not be very effective in curbing the power of large capitalists. In the next chapter we will see how local protestors construct a unified local opinion or voice with an urban audience in mind.

Chapter 5: Meanings of Protests.

“All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify.”

Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959: 72).

As Goffman famously suggested, all social life and daily social interactions can be conceptualized as a kind of performance in which people present to observers images of themselves and the collectivities to which they belong. This chapter examines protests of the villagers in Singur who were against land acquisition as situated performances of the villagers aimed at the Marxist regime, the media, urban activists, and also me, the anthropologist. More generally, it examines how villagers tried to appeal to a wider audience and thereby constructed a unified voice and cohesive image of themselves. To do so, the locally influential individuals, mostly small landholders, used idioms and languages that created a dichotomy between the urban and the rural and also constructed images of villagers as “peasants” who were opposed to industrialization and development. In doing so, the multiple voices and opinions within the villages and contradictions within individual villagers were concealed, or those voices got sidelined. This desire of many villagers did not surface in the public face of the protest because the only way the villagers could communicate their attachment to land to a wider audience comprising of the urban activists and intellectuals was through the discourse of the “peasant” and

the “rural” in the absence of any other trope that would express the complexity of their attachment to land.

The complexity of the villagers’ dissent and insecurity was expressed to me by a small landholding villager, Janardan, who supported the Nano project. I interviewed Janardan at the Tata factory site where he worked as a guard. Referring to the small landholders, Janardan said, “People think something and say something else (*Mone ek Mukhe ar-ek*).” They want to raise the price of the land, but they protest against building of the factory. I had asked Janardan why the small landholders were so reluctant to have any dialogue with the government officials. Janardan laughed and said, “People here do not know how to talk to officials from Calcutta who sit at the table and chairs. They talk to local land brokers or middlemen over tea or puffed rice (*muri*), and each one can individually negotiate when they decide to sell their land. When middlemen come you can first say no and feel important, but when the state asks, you have to show whatever you have. It is like police wanting to search your bag [pointing to my bag]. If I ask you, you may not show me what you have in your bag. If the police ask you, you cannot say no. Your honor (*man*) gets challenged”

According to Janardan, it is this curtailment of the right to say no that had pushed so many into protest marches. While the police featured in his answer as metaphor for the state, the police were actually marching and driving down the village neighborhoods. Presence of the police was a direct reversal of policies of the Left Front Government for the last thirty years because in the cases of small

landholders' and sharecroppers' fight against the landlords, the police was asked not to assist the landlords. Giving land to a multinational company through the application of an eminent domain act was morally unacceptable to the villagers and challenged their self-understanding and self-images as landowners and also their implicit understanding with the state or the regime. Yet, many wanted a factory so that they could go and work at the factory to meet the inadequacy of the agricultural income.

Following Goffman, I suggest that the protest practices can be understood in terms of a front-stage and a backstage. The urban activists were clearly the audience for the performances in the front-stage. However, in order to understand the rhetoric and practices of protest we need to understand the two aspects of West Bengali rural modernity⁵⁸ that I highlighted in the chapter on "Peasants and Present History of West Bengal." In the latter chapter, I argued that rural modernity in the West Bengali villages has two distinct aspects. One aspect is the cultivation of private interests around farming and land-ownership based on individual possession of land and a cultivation of an ethic of non-manual, non-agricultural work and emulation of urban lifestyles. The cultivation of an ethic of non-agricultural work is also an effect of constant fragmentation of

⁵⁸ Here by the word "modernity", I mean a certain internalization of the ideas of progress and development among the villagers. In the chapter on Peasants and Present History of West Bengal, I have shown how that took place in the context of Left politics and land redistribution and Green Revolution. In the introduction, I referred to Akhil Gupta (1997:320) who points out that understanding of oneself in terms categories such as modern or non-modern or developed or underdeveloped is a social fact in the villages of North India, not merely an analytical choice available to the scholar. Gupta also points out that the internalization of the idea of progress, development, and modern takes place within certain contexts, hence I refer to the particular self-understandings as West Bengali rural modernity.

land as brothers divided up their plots across generations by constructing boundaries.⁵⁹ Another concomitant and contradictory aspect was to valorize the “rural community” and “the peasant” as culturally distinct from the urban, and to conceive of farming and agriculture as an activity that constitutes the very substance of society or the social whole.⁶⁰ The contradiction is that there is both valorization of peasant ways of life and at the same time an urge to escape it and adopt urban lifestyles.

Both the aspects are peculiarly modern and contemporary but they contradict each other.⁶¹ In the case of the protest practices, the aspect of rural modernity that gives rise to private interests around land forms the backstage because each small landowner, irrespective of landholding size, had very private and individual plans for his or her plots. Yet, the protests had to be collective because the large stretch of land was being acquired by the state or government agencies that were perceived as an outside force. The rhetoric of collective protests was drawn from the second aspect of rural modernity, i.e. valorization

⁵⁹ This is not an inevitable effect but an effect equal patrilineal inheritance which has been strengthened by land redistribution. But patrilineal inheritance in itself is not an effect of land redistribution because such rule existed prior to land redistribution and also found in other parts of South Asia (see Akhil Gupta 1998, p98 and Bose 2001 for inheritance of land and sharecropping rights in Bengal)

⁶⁰ I can only note in passing that Tagore’s project of activating the swadeshi samaj or the nationalist project of constructing a resistant ‘inside’, was a historic attempt to forge a “gram samaj” or rural community. However tentative and tenuous was this ‘community’, it was an entity – a ‘thing’ – that was acted upon in nationalist mobilizations (especially after Gandhi) against the colonial state. To the extent pedagogic nationalism was successful, this imaginary institution of ‘society’ was not a mere figment of elite imagination: repeated enactments *performed* it.

⁶¹ I have discussed the topic in the first chapter.

of the rural community or the peasant identity that was formed during the decades of Left politics in the villages.

The contradictory aspects got expressed in two very contradictory opinions regarding land acquisition among the small landholding villagers. One opinion was that agricultural land should not be acquired for building a factory because that will take away land and livelihoods and will destroy the collective rural culture of the villages. According to this opinion land is the cornerstone of rural society and its importance in villagers and small landholders life can only compared the significance of mother in ones life. The other diametrically opposite opinion⁶² was that the Tata Company should directly come to small landholders and negotiate with them individually. In the latter case, the landless would not be able to negotiate compensation because the land would be bought directly from the owners and only the owners would receive the money. The third opinion was to collectively negotiate compensation and rehabilitation for whomever would be affected by the land acquisition.

The first opinion came to dominate over the other two, especially the third one because the rhetoric of village protests dovetailed very well with the urban Left activists' notion of the rural and "the peasant," and it also served the main opposition party Trinamul Congress to push for its populist agenda of challenging the hegemony of the ruling Marxist in the West Bengali villages. The

⁶² This is diametrically opposite because the significance and importance of land does not stop landholdings from being commodities in the case of a direct transaction or negotiation between the landholders and the Tata Corporation or the brokers and the middlemen.

rhetoric of the rural and the peasant also received popular acceptance because it was easy to unite the villagers on the basis of such idioms of rural harmony⁶³ rather than initiating a dialogue among the villagers, who had multiple and contradictory interests. Thus, by projecting a unified voice and “the peasant” identity, the protestors were dominated by their protest rhetoric and idioms, which made it very difficult for them to enter into any dialogue with the government, as anything short of complete opposition to land take-over was seen as compromise with the policies of the ruling regime.

The government’s method of acquiring land also hardened the position of many villagers. The methods of acquiring land were characterized by bureaucratic interventions, use of the police force, and a reliance on formal legal means in contrast with protracted informal means of persuasion based on unofficial dialogues and discussions. The villagers and small landholders were invited to meetings and discussions with bureaucrats. However, villagers and small landholders and the local leaders were not well-equipped for such formal bargaining. Land is bought and sold in the villages through brokers who approach families and households individually. Many things, such as default on water tax and land tax and problems with inheritance that can be confided to the local brokers cannot be presented in front of the government officials. This highhandedness of the state was an effort of the competition to attract the

⁶³ I have shown in the chapter on Peasant and Present History of West Bengal how the idea of rural harmony has been used by Left activists and politicians to misrecognize the differences within the villages.

investors and an urge to present itself as an efficient and investor-friendly to the entrepreneurs.

Nonetheless, the government invited the activists and the opposition party leaders for dialogue several times to discuss an improvement in the compensation and rehabilitation package that the government was already offering. However, the activists and the main opposition party shunned the dialogues, citing that the villagers were against any kind of industrialization on agricultural land, based on the villagers' own protest practices.

I would like the reader to consider certain facts regarding the acquisition of land before I discuss the protest practices. Before the 997 acre stretch was acquired by the government and seven hundred local villagers of various backgrounds were employed to construct the fence around the acquired plot, 75% (9,020/12,000 acres) of the title deed holders sold their land to the government voluntarily. These 9,020 title holders had 635 acres among them. The remaining 25% who did not give up land had multiple reasons for not giving up land. One among them was not possessing proper documents. Another was that many disagreed with the amount that was being paid as compensation. Participation in the protests had also created obligations towards the movement leaders who asked the landowners to keep their land. However, many thought that if they get back the land, which they had refused to sell to the government, the prices of their plots would increase if the factory was constructed.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduced the manner by which the contradictions of the protests were revealed to me. I examined some incidents to understand the front-stage and the back-stage of the protests. The second section of this chapter shows how the grievances against the government land acquisition were articulated in terms of rural-urban difference and exultation of rural life. The third section deals with the crucial aspect of women's participation in activating the land-based moral claims on the state and bureaucracy. The fourth section examines the subjectivities of the non-protesting villagers in terms of vignettes based on interviews with the villagers who participated in building the factory.

The Front-stage and Backstage of Rural Protest

The incident that set the tone for protests occurred on 25th May 2006. Some bureaucrats of the state government and Tata officials visited Singur for reconnaissance of the area where they thought they would build the factory. The television channels had also reached the site to report the news of the visit because any news of investment in West Bengal under the Marxists was worth reporting. Industrialists usually shunned the state because of aggressive trade union politics. While visiting, the visiting officials encountered a crowd of village women who came after them with broom sticks and kitchen utensils. Many of these women protestors blew the conch-shells that were usually blown during important religious observations.

The televised image of women with kitchen utensils, broom sticks and conch-shells became a very effective way for the Left radicals and the opposition party to shame the Marxist government's "unmarxist" ways of inviting big capital. The images of women resisting the officials were also used to demonstrate that the villagers were rejecting the model of industrialization that government would like to pursue. Following this incident, NGO (non-governmental organization) activists and many erstwhile revolutionaries⁶⁴ started visiting Singur and the media companies came from Calcutta regularly to shoot scenes of women protestors.

The key contradiction in the broom stick and utensil symbolism of the women was that although the women were seen as "peasant women" or *kisani*, they did not carry the sickle or the plough that the *kisani* or women tillers usually carry. The contradiction in the symbolism was further revealed to me when I saw one such protest event and followed up observation of my event with interviews with women participants.

One day, as I chatted with Mukta at his tea-shop, a van pulled up in front of the tea-stall. Journalists carrying microphones and a cameraman with his camera on his shoulders emerged from the van. They came to the tea-stall and enquired about Becharam Manna, the leader of the protest movement. Becharam Manna was around and he came running to court the media-persons. The person

⁶⁴ Leninist activists, who broke away from the Marxist party because it joined parliamentary politics and deserted the cause of the revolution.

with the microphone asked Becharam, if he could arrange for a protest demonstration done by the women. Becharam said that it would take some time because he had to go and inform the women. Becharam left on his motorbike. Within an hour, women from the village started arriving at the tea-stall where the media person waited. They came with broom sticks, kitchen utensils, and conch-shells. The media-persons started talking with the women who had gathered and told them that they should look directly at the camera and shout while displaying their broom-sticks and kitchen utensils. One of the journalists asked if they had brought their sickles. One woman, who had her head half covered in *saree* (traditional Bengali dress), replied that “we are not women of *majur* (laborer) households.” Her tone reflected that she was a little annoyed at the question.

The media commentator started his commentary declaring that the peasant women were very agitated at the news of land acquisition. The camera moved in front of the women and the women started waving the broom sticks, blowing the conch-shells, and shouting, “Land is our mother, we cannot give up land, and losing land is like losing our husband’s entire livelihood.” The camera stopped and agitated faces of women became normal and some of them smiled and asked when they would be able to see their faces on the television. After the shot was done, the women started dispersing. I went up to some of the women and asked them why they brought broom sticks and kitchen utensils. Malati Panja, one of the women in the crowd, replied, “We brought whatever we had in

front of our hands. Becha said, those items will tell the urban people that we are really poor village women." I asked them if their husbands are in the field and if I could go and talk to them. The women replied, "No, dear. How can you expect them to be at the field at this time of the day; they have gone for work outside the villages."

I later came to know, that the women who came to protest that day were mostly women from small landholding families who usually do not go to the field to till the land. The kitchen utensils and the broomsticks were things used by housewives. They came to represent their husbands, who mostly have non-farm occupations. However, the proliferation of the images and news-clips defined the terms of representing the state and the "peasants." The state's industrialization drive was seen as something absolutely foreign to the villagers who were farmers or peasants. The protesting villagers' actions were interpreted as growing out of a subaltern consciousness that rejects any kind of urbanization and industrialization.



Fig. 5.1 Protests in front of the camera. Photograph taken by the author while a journalist was shooting. August 2006.



Fig.5.2 Village women weeping in front of the camera. Photographed by the author when the journalists were

“Urban vs. Rural” in Village Protests

The protesting villagers who were small landholders often met at resting places near a pond in Gopalnagar. When I visited them, they were pouring over a map of the area that the government had announced it would acquire. Somenath, an accountancy graduate and a small farmer, was telling his brother that he was not sure whether the boundary of the area that would be acquired passed through their plot. If it moved an inch towards the south their plot would be saved, hoped Somenath, and that would mean Somennath said, “The price of the plot would increase.” Pareshnath Kolay, who was listening to Somenath, shouted angrily at him saying that it was not about his plot or anybody else’s plot. If the land was acquired, then everybody was going to suffer. Somenath, an accountancy graduate, was a farmer by default. He could not get a good job, so he supervised laborers in his father’s field apart from doing odd jobs. Pareshnath Kolay, a school teacher at high school in Serampore was a dedicated Trinamul worker. He had been trying to organize the villagers of *Mahisya* neighborhoods of Gopalnagar against land acquisition. Like Somenath, Pareshnath Kolay was also a small landholder and part-time farmer who liked to supervise laborers rather than till the land himself or do other manual work. He and other such part-time farmers would don a *gamcha* (a piece of cloth to wipe sweat). *Gamcha* is the symbol of labor, which also signifies farming. His youngest son worked as a surveyor and stayed away from home. The eldest son looked after and supervised farming and worked as a registered medical practitioner.

The complaints of the villagers and issues that Pareshnath Kolay raised differed significantly from each other. Although Kashinath was a villagers like everybody else, he considered himself to a village intellectual who should speak not only for himself but for the whole community. Pareshnath Kolay quoted poems of Rabindranath Tagore and spoke the language of environment and emphasized how the land acquisition and the factory will hurt the community life and health and morality of the villagers. He said, "We won't be able breathe anymore if the factory comes up. Our sons will take up arms and will become ruffians.⁶⁵" He said that he is not against industries per se but it should not be built on the farmland, "The farmland is our mother."

While Kashinath was apprehensive about the effects of the factory on the community, his neighbors and fellow part-time farmers had also been wondering why their land in particular was being taken. Some thought that their land has been targeted because they elected an opposition party candidate as the member of the legislative party. They thought the districts or the villages where the ruling regime is strong had been spared. One villager said, "Why can't the government go to Bardhaman, the district from where the industry-minister hails?" They were not referring to land as mother as Kashinath did. Their worry was that in the next ten years the price of land would be much more than what the government was offering. Some said, "Can the government pay that amount? It will be broke." Some of them said that union problems in the factories where

⁶⁵ He used the English word "ruffian."

they had worked led to the shutdown of those factories. Therefore, land was their only reliable source of employment.

Moreover, if their sons did not get a job, they could earn something off the land. Others had bought land through the money earned from other professions or remittances sent by sons or brothers who worked in the jewelry sector elsewhere in the country. In some cases, the legal documents required to claim the compensation were not there. Often, the plot remained in the name of the people of older generations and had not been formally passed on to their progenies. In addition, there were many who bought land at prices much higher than what had been recorded at the Block Development Office. The government price was calculated according to the recorded price that had been low to evade taxation.

As noted above, Pareshnath Kolay's voice was a little different from others. Kashinath would quote poems of Rabindranath to show how erstwhile landlords appropriate land from the peasants. The poem that Kashinath recited described distress selling of land. The poem went like this:

*Sudhu bigha dui,
chilo mor bhui,
aar sab-i geche rine,
Babu balilen, "Bujhecho Upen,
e jami loibo kine."*

(After losing everything in debt, I had only two bighas of land left.

However, the Babu said, "Upen, you must sell that to me.")

[from *Dui Bigha Jami* (Two Bighas of Land) by Rabindranath Tagore, 1895]

He tried to present the simplicity, reciprocity, and stability of village life and used the language of a divide between the urban and the rural. Kashinath said that they (meaning small landholders) give potatoes and other vegetables to the landless, almost without taking anything, such as labor and money, in exchange. Therefore, nobody ever had a problem securing food. Kashinath would ask me to take copious notes on what he said and that I must write in my thesis that the government is taking away land from “poor” and “helpless”⁶⁶ villagers who have no other source of income but farming. He added that “if you go 20 km. from here you will come across the *Diara* grounds, which is “barren land.” Factories could be built there.” I said that even the “barren” land of *Diara* is used for grazing animals by the landless people residing in the area and wherever one goes in Hooghly district there is a farming community. Kashinath retorted, saying that the government could have given land at the open spaces in the heart of Calcutta.

Following Kashinath’s comments, the other farmers started discussing Dhananjay’s death. The portrayal of community life as one of reciprocity and stability was crucially based on an opposition between the urban and the rural. In recent years, the urban-rural opposition has been created on the cause célèbre of a rural youth from Midnapur district named Dhananjay Chatterjee who was hanged to death. Dhananjay worked as doorman in one of the posh localities of Calcutta. The story goes that he was involved in the rape and murder of a school-

⁶⁶ Kashinath’s own words

going girl, daughter of a wealthy non-Bengali Gujarati businessman and a resident of the building in which Dhananjay was the door attendant. It was proved in court that he actually raped and killed the girl. However, by the time case was conclusively proved, Dhananjay had spent almost twelve years in jail. According to the Indian penal code, if the perpetrator in a case of murder had been also charged with the security of the victim, the punishment for such a crime was hanging. The jury at the Indian Supreme court asked for Dhananjay's hanging. The President of India could pardon him of his crime. However, the Marxist chief minister and the provincial government did not show any interest in requesting the President to pardon Dhananjay. The opposition parties and newspapers had used this to portray the government stance as favoring the non-Bengali business families vis-à-vis a poor village youth trying to make it in the city.

Dhananjay's story had an enormous impact on the rural people, especially the farmers with whom I talked. Dhananjay became a symbol of how the rural is being oppressed by the urban or the cosmopolitan. While the protesting farmers invoked Dhananjay, the villagers who were indifferent to the factory or partially in its favor also called upon the Dhananjay incident to express their grievances against the state and the urban. Mukta, whom I have discussed in the last chapter, said that he had hired someone for Rs. 5 daily to read out to him Dhananjay stories from newspapers.

Another trope that was used to unify the individual interests and opinions of protesting peasants was the idea of a rural food crisis. While there are problems with rationing, i.e. the public distribution systems in the villages, a state-wide food crisis was predicted and portended by the local activists such as Pareshnath Kolay. The non-participating village households were regularly threatened that the price of rice was going to increase, if the land was given up. Another local activist, Manik, about whom I will write later, a commerce graduate, would go from door to door in the Gopalnagar neighborhoods to warn everybody that if the 1,000 acres land were gone, more land would be taken around the state and that would lead to an acute food crisis. These were some of the ways insecurity was communicated to both the villagers themselves and also to the outsiders.

Women's and Children's Participation

Women's participation played a significant role in the media communication between the village protestors and urban audience. They conveyed an identity of a stable and secure peasant community dependent on farmer husbands who may lose their prestige, status, and livelihood if their land is sold or taken away. Thus, the women marked their protest practices with performative elements such as playing of conch-shells and demonstrations with broom-sticks and kitchen knives. A few times women would lie down on roads to obstruct the way of the police jeeps or government vehicles carrying the

district magistrate who would come to talk to the villagers. The local leaders of ruling Marxist parties who wanted to convince the villagers were restricted from entering the village and were asked not to spoil (*nasta*) the minds of the innocent villagers who do not want to give up land.

The women, who protested so publically, were mostly wives or daughters of the *Mahisya* landowning farmers. Among the *Mahisyas* and *Goalas*, young married women would rarely go to the field unaccompanied by their husbands. Only middle aged and older women would go to the field for supervisory work. I rarely saw unmarried *Mahisya* and *Goala* women doing supervisory work in the field. As I have written before, the labor intensive work in the field was mostly done by the women and men of castes lower than the middle castes. Women, however, look after the household, i.e. the children and the cows. Often they took cows for grazing. However, there were well-off *Mahisya* and *Goala* households and there were those that are not-so-well-off and poor. The poor *Mahisyas* and *Goalas* were nearly landless or had lost their claim to land to their relatives. Landholding sizes of some of these households were so small that farm income was not enough, and they would work on others' land as sharecroppers. Young women of these households often worked alongside men in supervising the farm laborers and in getting vegetables and crops from the farm to the home.

Once I asked Manab Panja, a local activist, why they put the women in the front of every procession. Manab said that the women were the symbol of village life, and they were the cornerstone of their households and family. He believed

that women's participation in the protest marches would send the signal to everybody about how insecure the villagers were going to be if the land were taken away. Manab also said that police do not touch the women. Although the state had deployed female police personnel, there were not many women in the police force. According to Manab, the strategy of the protestors was to make the state spend so much on deployment of police that the state would go broke and would not take land. Manab was sure the daily expenses of the state had escalated, since the protest began.

Deploying police was becoming troublesome because the locals would make abusive remarks. The police would, however, try to befriend the villagers. They would say they are also from farming households. The policemen and women would ask for water or would even use the toilets in the villagers' houses. However, many of the villagers were annoyed to find women working for the police force because among the small landholding villagers, there was a strong rule against young and middle-aged women working outside the house. The small landholding villagers thought the factory would destroy the social fabric of the village where women have a very respectable position. Older and middle-aged men like Manab thought women should be asked to participate more in protests because it is the women who were going to lose respect if their village became like a town.

Women's relationship to land in the village was twofold. First, the selling of land played an important part in paying for the dowry that a daughter takes

when she is married. Second, the wife gets a share in the land after the husband dies. Thus, widows can live off the land after their husbands' death. Lakshmi Dasi, one such Mahisya widow was an active participant in the movement. Lakshmi, wearing a white *sari*, led many of the protest marches against the acquisition. Her widowhood expressed in the white sari that she wore also made a telling symbol of the dissent because many nationalist activists also wore white *sari-s* to protest against British colonialism. Lakshmi was compared with figures of the nationalist anti-colonial Quit India movement, such as Matangini Hazra, led by Mahatma Gandhi in 1942.

Lakshmi Dasi's house was located in the Beraberi. She lives there with her elder son who worked in Tarakeshwar in a factory. The younger son stayed in Delhi and worked there as a jeweler. Sarswati Dasi supervised the laborers in the field and grew rice-paddy and potatoes. Some years she leased her land out to other villagers. She had to sell a small piece of her land to a neighbor to extend her brick house. Lakshmi thought farming didn't require much time. Therefore, she had encouraged her sons to work outside so that they could earn more. Here, I reproduce her responses to my questions:

I have sent the younger son abroad. You must know, my dear, that there are not many opportunities around here, so I have sent him to Delhi. Farming does not require much work. You need to go in the morning and recruit the laborers and again go in the afternoon to feed them. I can do such work. However, we cannot live without the rice-paddy that is produced in our fields. The quality of the rice-paddy that we get from the public distribution system is not good enough.

Lakshmi Dasi's most significant complaint about the factory issue was that building of the factory had raised the daily wages of local landless laborers who worked as farm laborers. They were getting more than sixty rupees everyday from the project and had been asking for more than sixty rupees to work for the small landholders, such as Lakshmi. As I have said before, the small landholders kept the daily wage rate much below the official wage rate.

I was invited to a very unique demonstration by the villagers after the land had been acquired. This demonstration was also well attended by media persons and took place on a January morning in the village of Beraberi during a ceremony worshipping the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. The Hindu goddess Lakshmi is the deity of education and learning, and usually school-going children were encouraged to attend the Lakshmi Puja. The children were asked to come to the site where the deity was placed in the village neighborhood, and they were asked to stand naked in front of the camera of the media-person from Calcutta. The naked bodies of the children were portrayed as symbols of how acquisition of land has made the children of the villages naked both literally and metaphorically. The cameramen from TV channels came and taught the boys what to say in front of the camera. As the shots were taken, the children repeated those words verbatim with apt facial expressions:

Our parents have lost everything, they have lost their land. So we are naked and hungry and going without education and food. Return our land.

However, this construction of unified communal voice was not devoid of certain silences. The families who refused to join the movement against land acquisition were boycotted or they were abused in the public places and vegetables from their fields were uprooted. One of the movement activists had introduced me to a woman of one such family. The woman was not very enthusiastic about giving up land but she emphasized that none of her sons were going to farm and the few *bighas* of land that they had was not enough for their family. Her husband had to work outside to earn a substantial living. A negotiation over compensation, she thought would serve her purpose. My meeting with this woman was also looked upon by local activists as a gesture of not supporting the cause. The one who introduced me to her had to hear many abusive remarks.

Many near landless men and women who belonged to *Mahisya* and *Goala* castes were in favor of the project but they were paid money everyday to join the protests. They had initially joined and walked in the protests because many of them were dependent on other landholders. They leased land from small landholders and employed laborers to cultivate the fields. Out of such dependence, many agreed to walk in the protest marches. However, once the government started recruiting local villagers to work temporarily on the factory site, many joined the workforce because the government was paying according to the official wage rate, which was much more than what one would usually earn locally from agriculture and other related jobs such as pulling rickshaws.

Bidhan was one such villager who worked as an assistant in a meat shop in Beraberi bazaar in the morning, pulled a rickshaw by day, and worked as a guard at the factory site in the evening shift. Small landholding villagers had threatened that they would beat him up if he deserted the protests. He said he would join the protest if they would pay him as much as they pay him at the factory-site. Many small landholding villagers started shunning the meat shop where he worked in order to boycott him and his family.

Presentation of Self in Front of the NGOs, Activists, and Radical Leftists

There was talk among the urban activists about calling Medha Patekar, the famous international anti-dam activist. Opposition political parties and NGOs claimed that Medha had been informed. The local activists and the NGOs believed that Medha's presence would help the anti-land acquisition movement and it would attract wider and national civil society attention. Moreover, in national politics, Medha often allied with the CPI (M). Therefore, Medha's presence and involvement of her brand of people's movement would give the protests more media coverage and would help them influence the wider Left public. While the CPI (M)'s had an anti-land acquisition stand nationally, in the province where they are in power, they were acquiring land to industrialize. This was a contradiction. For the NGOs, the Marxist party were selling themselves all out to the corporate sector.

Thus, the objective of bringing Medha was to expose the double-standards of the Marxist party. Until Medha's involvement and arrival, the movement was more or less a struggle against the ruling Marxists. Medha, through her speeches and with NGO members in the audience, gave the movement an anti-globalization character.

Medha Patekar and her associates from various leftist organizations held a *lok-adalat* or people's court in the Gopalnagar mouja on 27th October, 2006. The *adalat* was held on an open space surrounded by two or three-storied houses of villagers, mostly of *Mahisyas* and *Goalas*. The *adalat* was attended by urban intellectuals, NGO representatives, and members of Left political parties and the Trinamul Congress, and the protesting villagers were drawn mostly from the group of small land owners. While Medha Patekar and her associates sat on the podium, intellectuals and villagers came on the stage to state their opinions about the government, the land acquisition and industrialization. The *lok-adalat* was supposed to be open also to the supporters of the regime and land acquisition; nobody represented the view of the government or the ruling party.

The urban participants, the NGO members, party politicians, and the intellectuals mostly said that they doubted whether a factory would come up. Taking away farmland, they stressed, was going to destroy the stable community life of the villages dependant on sustainable agriculture. Agriculture, they said, was the lifeline of a nation. They criticized the government slogan "agriculture is our base, industry, our future" and said the government was trying to destroy

the very base on which the nation stands. An eminent Calcutta intellectual, Sunanda Sanyal, said that there was a radical difference between the farmer and the worker. The farmer cultivates his own land and owns his means of production, but the worker works on others premises with tools not his own. Therefore, land should not be taken away from farmers.

They also said that they suspected that the Tatas had some under-the-table dealings with the government to build a real-estate enclave on the farmland. Some said the Tatas were also going to use the 1,000 acres as a farmland to produce genetically modified crops depriving the peasants of their food crops. Such comments suggested that the local farmers used very simple agricultural practices and an ignorance of actual agricultural practices. Many smallholding farmers told me that they buy seeds for tomatoes and other vegetables from a store in another district. The seeds come in attractive packets showing the photographs of the vegetables. The small landholders talked about these seeds approvingly. The vegetables grown out of these genetically modified seeds, they said, are much bigger than what they usually get from *dishi* or local seeds. However, the small landowners in the crowd did not contradict the urban intellectuals' view of them as peasants who use very simple technologies and inputs in their agricultural practice.

Among the small landowners, Pareshnath Kolay explained how the acquisition was going to affect the rickshaw pullers who transported the paddy or potato to the cold storage and the landless laborers who come from other

districts. He emphasized that agriculture was also an industry and employed many people. He introduced himself as farmer, even though his primary occupation was teaching in a high school. Another small landowner, Bikash, said human beings are more evolved and different from other animals in that they care for their progenies' future. He said that as farmers they care for their progenies' future; they would like to hold on to their land so that after a decade or two the price of the land would be five times the current market price. Thus Bikash's reference to a speculative value of land was ignored by the urban activists.

Medha Patkar asked Bikash about his occupation. He said he was in the construction business but his family was completely dependent on farming. Patekar looked very satisfied, not knowing that Bikash's brother had also joined his brother's construction business and that Bikash would be part of the group of small local entrepreneurs who would supply materials for the building of the Tata factory. Nor did she know that Bikash and his family were, however, staunchly opposed to the ruling CPI (M) party because of its business-unfriendly attitude. Pareshnath Kolay's wife Mayarani and other wives of small landholders came to say how difficult it would be for them to raise their children if the land were gone. There were no questions about what the offspring from *Mahisya* and *Goala* families did for a living.

After the *lok-adalat* (court) was held, Medha Patkar and her associates held a closed-door meeting before letting people know their judgment. Although

one could foresee what the judgment was going to be, there was a huge gathering on a larger ground at Beraberi. The gathering at this meeting was bigger than what it was during the court. Medha came to the stage to announce that she supported the movement. She said that she had realized that agriculture is solely responsible for the prosperity of the villages. Moreover, Calcutta roads are full of cars, so automobile factories, she believed, were not required. She promised that she would ask Chief Minister and his cabinet ministers about siting of the factory, and if she did not get a satisfactory answer she would come join the protesting villagers. Her slogan was “*Vinash nahin vikash chahiye*” (No destruction, Only Development).

She said that the World Bank or the IMF (International Monetary Fund) cannot tell the peasants what kind of development they will opt for. If the meaning of development is dictated by the international institutions or the Tata, then the peasant movement is a freedom movement. She invoked the names of Mahatma Gandhi and Ram Manohar Lohia to talk about an alternative model of development based on dialogue among various sectors of the society and choices of the community. However, Medha’s speech was based on a three-hour stay in the villages around the acquisition area. The villagers who looked forward to the project could not talk to Medha because the peasants and villagers opposed to the project would not let her meet with them or talk to them.

Mahasweta Devi, a noted litterateur and social activist was also present at the public meeting. Mahasweta Devi is known for her activism in defending the

rights of the people in the regions of West Bengal inhabited by the indigenous tribal groups, such as Lodhas who have historically been deprived of the privileges of fertile agrarian land. She compared the small landholding villagers of Singur with the poorer Lodha villagers of infertile western districts of West Bengal. She compared the Chief Minister of West Bengal with George Bush and said that for her there is no difference between Buddha (the Chief Minister) and Bush.

The villagers recited many leftist poems in front of Medha Patkar and Mahasweta Devi. Many of these poems appear in school text books that I knew about because I also memorized them when I was in school. These poems and songs extolled the peasants and their relationship to land and agriculture. I will quote one such poem here that romanticizes the sickle that tillers use as a symbol of revolution.

The Sickle
Sharpen your sickle, my friend
Perhaps, you loved the crescent of the new moon very much.
However, this not the age of the moon,
The moon of this era is the sickle.

Villagers who did not Protest

The non-protesting villagers can be divided two groups – those who ardently supported the project and those who were ambivalent towards the project. The local small entrepreneurs were the ones who mostly supported the project. These small entrepreneurs owned grocery shops and construction

businesses. People, such as Saila Sahana, Tarak Karmakar, Kushal Saha⁶⁷, and many other small and petty businessmen were looking forward to the project because they would gain immediately from the project. They would make money by supplying building material to the project. These individuals and their followers, who were also engaged in petty trade, had agrarian and small landholding farmer background. Some of them, such as Kushal Saha, belonged to a money-lender family. However, other individuals, who would later form a group to supply materials to the project, were mostly from small landholder background.

Although agriculture had been their mainstay, lately these people had diversified into transport, brick, stores, and other kinds of petty businesses. Some of them also bought land from the local small landholders to sell those plots at higher prices to outsiders interested in setting up the factory. These petty traders were mostly supporters and financiers of the main opposition party, the Trinamul Congress, which had been fighting against the ruling regime along with the activists, and other opposition parties. While Saila Sahana was a staunch supporter of Trinamul, a few years ago, Kushal Saha and Tarak Karmakar financed the election campaign of the opposition MLA from Singur. These people were powerful in rural life because their networks were the major sources of employment for the rural youth who could no longer get gainful employment in agriculture. The point that I am trying to emphasize is that the villagers who

⁶⁷ These are all pseudonyms.

were unwilling to part with their land were economically dependent for non-farm employment on the small entrepreneurs of the villages who welcomed the project because the Nano factory would give them opportunities to expand their businesses.

I was able to talk with fourteen small entrepreneurs out of the three hundred who supplied materials to the building of the Tata factory. The average of these small entrepreneurs was approximately 40. My interactions were mostly based open-ended and semistructured interviews. Here, I would write about my interactions with two of these individuals—Saila Sahana and Asim Das. Saila Sahana had always been in favor of the project and had sold his land to the government, but Asim Das had joined the activists and later withdrew himself from it.

Saila Sahana.

Saila Sahana commanded huge respect in the villages because he employed many village youth in his construction and transport business. Saila's father was a small landholding peasant, but at a very young age, Saila had dropped out of school to go to Delhi and get trained as a jewelry worker. After working for sometime in Delhi and in Jaipur, Saila returned to his native village to invest the money he had earned in land. He then sold land to a chemical factory that had come to Gopalnagar village at five times the price for which he bought the plot. The money that he gained by selling his land was invested in a

jewelry business. He set up a jewelry workshop in Singur and employed many local young men from small landholding families.

The day I visited Saila he was very agitated about the protestors because they had been using his plot to construct a structure where protestors can sit and demonstrate. Saila was asking a protesting villager why he joined the protest if he wanted his son to work for Saila's business. Saila turned to me and asked me to sit. The villager left and Saila gave me a disgusted look and said, "My father was also a peasant and I am not protesting. Why do these people protest and then come to me if I can give them some work at the Nano factory site?" He continued, "People like you come from the city and encourage the villagers to protest." I asked Saila "if everyone was going to benefit from the project?" Saila asked me to consider how the building of the highway had already changed the lifestyle of the small landholding families in Gopalnagar. Many like him, he said, had given land for the highway and did not receive enough compensation. This time, he said, the compensation that the government was giving was enough and the protestors still had room to negotiate. When land was taken for the highway, Saila said that his father could not even negotiate.

I asked Saila if the protests are just a sham. Saila said that the villagers think that they will keep the land for generations, but that did not happen in many cases. When time comes for a daughters' wedding or paying for a son's education, they sell land and settle for amounts even less than what they would be getting now. He said that he himself had bought many such plots, which were

sold in order raise money for dowry, a son's education, and also to send them abroad for jewelry work. Saila said villagers also came to him to sell land when they need to expand their houses. Saila, however, noted that many villagers did not update their records and deeds. Moreover, the prices of the plots were under-reported because the *sarkar* (the panchayat) levies a 10 percent tax on the selling price, which neither the buyer nor the seller would like to pay. The government determined the price of the plots based on those prices. Saila thought that without giving up land "development" or "*Unnati*" of Singur is not going to take place.

Asim Das

The same theme of *Unnati* and development was echoed by Asim Das, who had joined the protest for some time and then withdrew. Asim said that the protestors should have organized to negotiate a good compensation and rehabilitation package. However, to his dismay the turn that the protests had taken was inimical to "*Unnati*" or development of Singur. "Try to understand," he said, "Tata or no Tata, small landholders here are selling land. Many plots along the highway have been sold to so many outsiders and non-Bengali businessmen. He said, "So, what is wrong in setting up a Tata factory here?"

Asim thought that the protestors were acting as if they were fighting a war of independence. The Tata Company, he thought, was an Indian company, and there was nothing wrong in letting them set up a factory there. Asim was, however, very critical of the Marxist government. The Marxist government, he

said, had taught the villagers and “us Bengalis” to disobey authority. They have shut down so many factories and now they want to industrialize. The protest tactics that the villagers were following, Asim said, had been taught by the Marxist regime. If the Marxists had been the opposition, Asim thought, they would have organized the villagers in the same way as the opposition party had.

Another network for employment was the political parties, such as CPI (M) and the opposition party, Trinamul Congress. The petty traders and businessmen worked closely with the parties and therefore the selection of laborers in individual projects was also done based on party recommendation and requests. Therefore, access to employment depended on one’s closeness to any of the parties or the petty businessmen. To get recruited to the Tata Motors project, the landed and the landless villagers went to local bosses of the CPM. In each village, the CP I (M) party assigned a person to recruit workers for guarding and working on the premises of the project.

In the construction of the Nano factory, locals were hired in batches of 70 from each village and each batch had a captain who would keep a tab on each of the workers and keep a record of the hours they spent working and guarding the factory site. Guards were employed in two shifts to accommodate as many workers as possible. Apart from guarding the premises, the locals were hired by the contractors to empty trucks loaded with sand, cement and bricks. The people who laid the bricks came from outside the local villages. The brick-laying is a specialized labor-intensive task with taboos attached to it. Bricklaying is usually

done by Muslims or lower caste people. Locally, masons were not available, and not all villagers preferred to work as masons.

The mood of the people working for the project was generally indifferent. While many of the landed peasants and sharecroppers who had given up their land were supporters of the CPM, there were also those who favored the Trinamul. Many of the landless peasants who initially had walked in the protest marches joined the workforce that helped the government build the basic infrastructure for the factory. The local workers who worked in shifts of 8 hrs were paid approximately Rs. 70 per day (\$ 1.7). The rate was a little above the minimum official wage in the agricultural sector, which is Rs 67.70, but rarely do farm laborers earn more than Rs. 45 from the small landowners. Hence, there was a huge demand for work at the site. For emptying the trucks, the workers received much more. Some of them earned Rs. 500 per day.⁶⁸ Landless individuals or those with little land contacted mostly the party bosses to get to work in the site. Thus, the demand for non-agricultural work divided the rural population because the villagers close to the CPI (M) had a better chance of getting employment. The villagers who were close to Trinamul Congress had to request the local leaders of the CPI (M) for work. Requesting a leader of a party of which one is not a supporter was extremely humiliating. In the following vignettes, I will present the opinions of the villagers who joined the workforce. I

⁶⁸ As reported to me by the individuals who were engaged in such work at the factory site.

met these villagers when I interviewed them and members of their households and later I interviewed the villagers at the factory site.

Sanat *da* (elder brother)

Sanat *da* was middle-aged and well-built. Sanat *da* had been an ardent Trinamul supporter. He sold his two *bighas* of land and started working on the site as a guard. Sanat *da* was a bit unhappy that he had to sell his land for the amount the government offered. As his land was close to the highway, he expected more money from the government. He complained that the opposition party and the activists would not go into dialogue with the government to raise the amount. He further regretted that if he could get more or less regular employment in the factory, that would have taken care of all the problems. He wished the Trinamul Congress and activists had negotiated a deal such that villagers like him would get an opportunity to earn a regular income from the factory site. Sanat *da* mentioned that agriculture could not provide him with year-long employment. He went to nearby towns, such as Liluah and Uttarpara to work part-time in the factories. He had a permanent job as a mechanic in a nearby factory. While he was working there, he spoiled one of his eyes from working with fire. After the incident, he left his job.

Sanat-*da*'s elder brother Biphol, who is a grocery shop-owner, is a little better off economically. While Sanat-*da* engages in hard manual labor, such as pulling the van loaded with sacks of crops or iron rods, Biphol manages the tiny

grocery shop. Biphol said that he had plots that he has sold to the government. The money that he received, he kept that in the post office in a monthly income scheme. The savings will give 3,000 rupees (\$66) every month. The people who were opposing the project, he said, did not want to have a debate on both sides of the story. However, Sanat-*da* said his brother is happy because his plot was located in the low-lying part. Sanat-*da*'s co-workers said that his brother had been a gainer by selling the land.

Tapan

While Sanat-*da* worked in the project site with grievances against both the ruling and opposition party and jealousy towards his elder brother who he thought has gained, Tapan Mali, who was younger than Sanat *da*, and who worked on the project site had different things to say. Tapan said that he gave up his land reluctantly. However, he said that he believes in evolution. Evolution or social evolution according to Tapan meant that industries will gradually take the place of agriculture. To refer to evolution, Tapan used the word *Bibartan* (meaning evolution in Bengali). *Bibartan* was a word not frequently used in the villages. Therefore, I asked him where did he get this word *Bibartan*?

Tapan said that he learnt it in the study classes organized by the CPI (M). Yet the knowledge of *Bibartan* could not stop Tapan from telling me that he was not very happy with giving up his land. He said had he not sold his land to the government, he could have employed day laborers to cultivate his field and

earned some money by selling the vegetables, jute, or rice paddy. That would sustain him and his family of two children and his wife for six months. Rest of the year he would go to nearby factories to work. Tapan wanted to get a permanent job at the factory. Only a permanent job or year-round regular employment would assuage the loss he suffered by selling off the land. Thus, Tapan finds the logic of *Bibartan* attractive because he thought that agriculture was not enough for his well-being. However, at the same time, losing agricultural land to industry is also something he accepted unwillingly. However, he conceded that the factories where he went to work were originally established on farmlands. He accepted his current situation saying, "Some will lose; some will gain."

Rajen Panja

I met Rajen Panja at the project site when recruitment for the project had just begun. Rajen had come to list his name in the project office. Although Rajen stays in Gopalnagar with his family, I never saw him in the processions or meetings. Rajen had to sell his 3 *bigha* of land to the government for the project. Rajen said that the three *bighas* that he had were not enough; he had to work in factories outside. He used to work in a plastics factory that was shut down due to labor trouble. He did not join the protests because he thought that many of the protesting villagers were not farmers themselves; rather they have well-paying jobs outside, and the money they save is invested in land to realize the appreciated value of land. Rajen said that he needs regular employment and

money, unlike Pareshnath Kolay who already has a permanent job at a school and can hold on to his land.

The landless workers in the project worked as guards or as people who emptied the trucks. The demand for jobs among the landed was so high that jobs were rationed among the landless by the project authorities and local leaders of the ruling regime, so that every landless individual could work three days a week. Many landless workers said that they resented the taking away of land because they would work on those by leasing them from the landed families. Moreover, many of them had not registered themselves as sharecroppers. Hence, they could not claim 25% of the amount paid to the landowner. However, many among the landless workers who came to work at the factory site with their wives said that if they received three days of employment at the current wage rate year-long that would take care of their families. However, they were apprehensive that the employment would not last long. A few of the landless youngsters, who were working because their schools were shut for summer holidays, showed their anger against the small landholders who, they said, would not let them graze their goats and would not pay them their dues on time.

Dilemmas Among Protesting Villagers

Many of the protesting peasants from small landholding families told me in their interviews that they were interested in working at factory-site but popular pressure kept them from working there. Moreover, in order to work, they had to show the documentation that they had sold their land to the

government.⁶⁹ Apart from that, they were required to meet with the local leaders of the ruling regime, who were aware that they had protested against the acquisition. While some joined the project work by jumping through the loops, many others did not.

Sambhu and his brother Uttam of Gopalnagar were two such men in their early thirties. Uttam went to work inside the project, but his neighbors, especially elderly women, asked him to stop working at the project site. Uttam and Sambhu agreed that agriculture could not provide them with year-long employment. They went to work at a factory in Liluah, a small industrial town close to Calcutta. They wanted to learn some new kind of work and had taken up jobs at a plastic factory. However, the factory was shut down within a year. The owners had asked workers to work for longer hours in order to produce a consignment within a deadline. Workers, led by the union, refused to give in to the demands of the owners. The management responded by dropping a piece of a defunct machine in the tank used by workers to drink water. The workers struck. Later, the strike ended, but the management gradually started transferring work from the factory where Uttam and Sambhu worked to other factories. Thus, within a few months the factory was shut and Uttam and Sambhu lost their jobs. Sambhu narrated the story to show how the labor unions of the ruling Marxist regime deliberately shut down factories and now they were trying to establish factories.

⁶⁹ The villagers who had given land were given priority over others in the recruitment of workers for the factory. Hence, anyone who wanted to work had to show that he or she sold the plot to the government.

I asked if the strike at the factory where he worked was right or wrong. Uttam said that it was wrong and then after a pause he said that it was right. A little later he said that it is very difficult to say whether the strike was right or wrong and added that he thought the same about the protests against the Nano factory.

Uttam's family had already sold land to a road-side gas station very close to the factory site. The building of this gas station had blocked passage of water from Mukta's uncle's plot (discussed in the last chapter). Uttam said that was done when he was young, so he does not know anything about that. Further enquiry revealed that Uttam and Sambhu's parents are separated and their father lives with another woman in a place away from Gopalnagar. Legally, their step brothers and sisters were also entitled to the plots that they own and their paper work was not ready to allow them to sell.

Manik

Uttam and Sambhu were landholding *Mahisyas* but they did not study beyond the 9th grade. Manik, another *Mahisya*, much younger than they, had a commerce degree. Manik was one of the organizers of the movement in Gopalnagar. His uncle and aunt were Trinamul members; he stayed at his uncle's place and actively took part in the protests. However, Manik never came across as a peasant. He always wore a shirt and trousers and shoes, and the shirt was always tucked inside the trousers. This appearance made him stand out from many of the men of his age-group who wore shirts and trousers without tucking them in or a shirt and *lungi* in casual settings. His attire indicated that he

rarely went to the field. He himself admitted that he last went to the field almost four years ago. Apart from organizing villagers against land acquisition, Manik sold insurance policies and shares of different companies. While asking small landholding families to participate in the protest, Manik also requested them to sign up for a policy if they had received their money from selling their land to the government. I asked him if he found his political activities and what he did for a living contradictory. He blushed and avoided the question saying, “We want industries but not on this land.”

Manik also sold shares of a chemical company located close to Gopalnagar. I asked him whether the factory was built on agricultural land. Manik said, “Yes, but it did not take up as much as this factory.” Manik was studying to get into a management school to become a manager. He told me how much more the managers of Tata and other companies earn than government employees. I told him that they can earn so much because the corporate houses get subsidies from the government, as you see right in your village how land is being acquired. He thought about that for a moment and asked, “So why do you and other urban people go abroad to work and study? You think it is immoral because we are trying to be like you guys?”

While Manik hoped to work and lead an urban lifestyle, his uncles protested the acquisition of agricultural land for industries. Although Manik supported his uncles and their friends, he also had a dislike for them because they never understood his worth as a graduate. His uncles, who were Trinamul

supporters asked me to buy them goat and liquor for a feast but Manik disapproved of that. He would say, “They do not understand that you are working towards a degree.” The last time when I met with Manik, he was protesting, but he was also planning to set up a store to sell connections for cell phones. I told him that it seemed that the Tata company would pull out of Singur. Manik looked at me in disbelief and said, “What are you saying? How can they pull out now?” Manik knew that he would get many opportunities for doing small businesses when the factory would start production, and people would come to the villages for various kinds of work, yet he could not accept that the factory would be built on their land.

Kalu Si

At Mukta’s tea-shop, I met Kalu Si. Among all his brothers, Kalu was the only one who supervised laborers in the field. His elder brothers would not even go to the field to supervise work. Kalu had joined the protests because his neighbors asked him to join. However, he wanted to sell some of his plots to the government; he was in dire need of money because he wanted to send his son to one of the private engineering colleges. Kalu sold his land but remained in the protest and even helped the protestors with money that he earned from selling his land. When urban activists and journalists asked him about his land, Kalu would ask, how could he give up land that belonged his ancestors. He was both caught in a dilemma and he was also dissenting.

In all my interactions with protesting villagers, they would continually remind me about what to write about them and how to represent them when I write a book. Pareshnath Kolay, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, would repeatedly tell me that as an outsider who was staying in the village, I would find how urban culture is spoiling (*nasta kore dicche*) the rural moral fabric. He would ask me to ignore those details and write that the villagers are solely dependent on farming. Kashinath would not make such comments to the urban activists and media persons who would visit the villages for 9 hours at the most but Pareshnath Kolay and others would repeatedly say that the villagers were solely dependent on farming. Like Pareshnath Kolay, Manik would also ask me not to write about the fact that he was planning to set up a stall for selling mobile phone connection when the factory would come up. "You must not write about all these but you must focus on the real issues (*asol ghotona*).” Here Manik implied that protests against land acquisition were the main issue and all their other activities and desires were insignificant.

Thus, there was a struggle to control how the villagers and the villages would be represented not only in the media but also in the ethnographic text that I am producing. However, by trying to control the representations of themselves in the media, the villagers tried to bind visitors, including me, the anthropologist, to an obligation to treat them the way they would like to be treated. Thus, protest practices were characterized by an explicit or implicit moral demand intended to dominate and restrict the ways in which the villagers could interact

with the state and express and communicate their desires. These protest practices were as disabling as they were enabling because they prevented the rural protestors and the urban activists from entering into any kind of dialogue with the regime members and bureaucrats even though they invited the leadership of the protests to dialogues several times.

The power that the moral obligation that protest practices, like any other communicative practices, create has been most tellingly expressed by Goffman in the following quote:

When an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect...The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they *ought* to see as the "is." (Goffman 1959 : 13 emphasis in original)

Conclusion

The rhetoric of stable and placid village life created pressure on the government and also attracted international attention. However, in the villages, the images of themselves that villagers had spun with the help of the media and the urban activists took lives of their own. The establishment of the factory became a dishonor for many villagers who did not accept the compensation

checks against their plots⁷⁰. Accepting checks or negotiating a rehabilitation package became dishonoring the protest movement. The villagers who accepted checks and joined the workforce were seen as greedy individuals who only understood money. The protesting villagers started seeing themselves as protecting the honor of their village and that of the women who demonstrated.

Ideas about honor hinged on the view that any compensation and rehabilitation for the land losers would be incommensurable because loss of livelihood could not be fully compensated. While that was true for many families, that view ignored the constant search for alternative employment in the villages. In turn the argument of incommensurability prevented the activists and opposition leaders from bargaining for a compensation and rehabilitation package that could be used as tool to negotiate with the state at other sites. This resulted in a paradoxical situation. Bargaining for better prices and rehabilitation came to be seen as giving in to state government's industrialization drive and not as a step to make the state government accountable.

The presence of the factory became a prestige issue for the dissenting villagers. Animosity developed among the villagers who worked on the factory premises and the villagers who would not accept checks for their land. When the factory was almost finished, a group of the protesting villagers turned violent because they saw there was no other way they could stop the building of the factory. These groups of villagers started beating up and physically harassing

⁷⁰ I have mentioned compensation checks in Chapter 1 and also in the beginning of this chapter.

their neighbors who worked in the factory or ridiculed them. Things turned critical when the protesting villagers started attacking and harassing the officials of the Tata factory and disturbing the factory work by creating road blockades. It was at this juncture that the Tata company decided to pull their factory out of West Bengal.

The protest performances were very successful in attracting media attention and the attention of an international and urban audience. However, the images and idioms that protestors used did not work well to express the multiple and complex views of the villagers. The front-stage protest practices emanated from the self-image that the small landholding villagers cultivated during the years when land sizes were large enough for maintaining a decent lifestyle. Additionally, the front-stage protest rhetoric was strengthened by the interpretation of outside activists and villagers' reading of what they wanted to hear. The language and idiom of protest that would reflect the complexity of ongoing crisis-ridden situation in agriculture did not develop. Moreover, it was difficult for the protestors to translate their political rhetoric into a bureaucratic language that the state would understand. The urban activist and the opposition political parties did not play that role because they were either influenced by a romanticized view of the village or they used dissent among the villagers to create a populist upsurge against the Marxist government.

Chapter 6: Construction of Authenticity and Representational Dilemmas of Urban Activism.

Are isolated protests successful?

One morning at the Singur station, Kasinath Kolay, a small landholding villager who taught in a school and who participated in the protests against land acquisition asked me, "What do you think? Are we successful?" By "we," Kolay meant the village protestors. Later, I learned from Kasinath's neighbors that his granddaughter had joined the Tata factory workforce as a trainee. However, the question raised by Kasinath, seen in a broader context, is precisely the problem that haunts activists and Left intellectuals alike: What counts as success for these isolated but much publicized social movements that seem to disrupt the hegemony of big capital? How can the isolated protests come together? Why do they not come together to emerge as a political force or agent? Why was there a counter-protest in favor of the factory when the factory was pulled out of Singur?

Unlike the last chapter, which focused on the rural protestors, the chapter examines the urban activists closely. In this chapter, I argue that the answers to the questions posed above must be sought in a critique of the practices of the urban activists and their representational tactics and strategies. The urban activists, I hope to show, tend to construct an authentic voice of "the peasants" in their effort to make connections with a transnational civil society that has its own agendas, views, and implicit or explicit interests. The construction of such authentic voice depends on ignoring or erasing differences of opinion among the

villagers and the villages and on a certain ambivalence on the part of urban activists in recognizing the desires and aspirations for “improvement” among villagers. The activist strategies to seek social justice that foreground the image of the villagers and villages as peasants selectively leads to closure and exclusion of the voices of many poor and non-poor and even protesting villagers themselves, who stood to gain from the building of the factory in different ways. Many villagers told me that the factory would have also saved them from going to distant places in search of work.

The role of the protests against the Nano factory in breaking the silence regarding injustices of liberalized policies of industrialization cannot be denied. Yet breaking the silence does not mean new kinds of silences are not being produced, reminds anthropologist John Gledhill. For example, Gledhill asks: “How do we balance the interests of an indigenous group in Amazonia, (which gets much more media attention) with those of poor people from other sectors of national society who have migrated into region in search of livelihood?” Similarly, in the context of Singur, we may ask: How do we balance the interests of the small landholders in holding on to their land with theirs and others desire for non-farm employment and interests of the landless who desperately search for non-farm work? Providing an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this chapter or this dissertation but John Gledhill’s (1998) suggestion---that today we must focus less on silence than on the greater dilemmas of speaking---seems to be very sound. Dilemmas of speaking are generated by an activist worldview

that privileges certain interests and concerns of the villagers or subalterns as real over other interests and concerns.

Dilemmas of speaking must be addressed by recognizing multiple voices within a particular site, acknowledging contradictions within the protesting individuals and formulating a language and vocabulary that goes beyond simplistic representations of complex realities. As I have shown in the chapter “Meanings of Protest”, desires for non-farm employment and better price for their plots of many villagers did not surface in the public face of the protest because the only way the villagers could communicate their attachment to land to a wider audience comprising of the urban activists and intellectuals was through the discourse of the “peasant” and the “rural” in the absence of any other trope that would express the complexity of their attachment to land.

The first section of this chapter analyses how an authentic⁷¹ “peasant voice” is created by an activist documentary. This section compares the documentary with an ethnography-based academic article written by the same documentary filmmakers and shows how the unevenness of rural society discerned in the academic article is lost in the documentary, which was shown in many university campuses and had popular appeal among urban and Left intellectual audiences. Here, I do not contend that the documentary filmmakers were dishonest or what they represent is completely untrue. I want to simply

⁷¹ Authentic in the following sense: entitled to acceptance or belief because of agreement with known facts or experience. Known facts and or experience are part of a discourse on the rural and “the peasant.”

point out that they worked with certain assumptions that kept them from discerning and representing the complexities. The second section is based on my interviews with student activists and urban Leftist activists. The third section examines the protest-writings of urban intellectuals.

A Documentary Film and an Academic Paper

The title of the academic/ethnographic essay that I am going to consider is Dayabati Ray and P. Roychowdhury's "Left Front's Electoral Victory in West Bengal: An Ethnographer's Account" (published in *Economic and Political Weekly* October 7, 2006). The academic essay is not about protests but about general rural politics in Hooghly district. The name of the documentary that I discuss is "Abad Bhumi or Farm Land." The documentary was shot by the authors of the academic essay trying to represent the protests against Nano. The documentary was set in Singur and the ethnography was carried out in Hooghly district where Singur is located. The article was based on an academic critique of the Left Front government's 30 year rule in West Bengal. The narrative was that the left movement in rural areas increased the political awareness of the landless lower castes or Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), yet the regime maintained its sway over the rural population and ensured a steady victory in the elections by compromising with the relatively affluent and landed sections of the rural population, i.e. the small landholders. The article refers to this section of the rural population as the "middle caste" and the caste groups such as

Mahishya, as I have referred to them in the previous chapters. Here, I will quote from the article written by the activists. Note that in the following passage and in rest of the article, the word “peasant” does not occur even once.

Some Mahishya families of the middle caste purchased lands. As a result, the class composition of these villages began to change. Some of these middle class Mahishya families became economically prosperous, combining farming with business and other economic activities. They were traditionally Congress Party supporters and hence had to confront the agricultural labourers led by the CPI(M) several times in the initial period of LF rule. Ironically, as these families became rich farmers, they gradually began to compromise with the CPI(M), manifested in the more recent phase through their affinity with the party leaders, economic favours and heavy contributions to party funds. The party also gradually began to shed its earlier hostility towards this section and started looking after their interests as well, though these people were still in favour of the return of Congress/Trinamul rule. The subaltern people belonging to the SC and ST categories of these villages view this political compromise between the party leaders and the landowning community with a sense of frustration. As they poignantly remarked, “The party has changed a lot. Persons against whom we struggled earlier have taken over the party now.” It is stated that the upper caste leader who locally led the CPI(M) during the period of militant struggles in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s left the party a few years after the installation of LF rule. Since then a few middle class persons with pro-Congress family backgrounds slowly emerged as the local leaders of the party and subsequently allied with the landed people. (4252)

The documentary was shot specifically for the purposes of representing the villagers’ protests against the Nano factory. The intended message of the documentary was that the peasants have an emotional connection with land and they are all against the building of the Nano factory. Ironically, when the authors of the above passage shot the documentary called, “*Abad Bhumi* (Farm Land),” or

when they were in their activist mode of representing the rural protests against land acquisition, they did not mention any such differences within the rural society. Rather, an undifferentiated “the peasant” or “the *krishak*” became the main protagonist. In the earlier chapters, I have pointed out the contradictions and tensions within this landed group. In the documentary, the responses of the landed people were passed off as responses of “the peasants.” The documentary film also did not explore what the villagers do apart from farming. Thus, in sharp contrast with the ethnography, the documentary film, which would be the primary channel of information for the urban audience, does not portray the disparate or contradictory voices but one single unified voice of “the peasant.”

The documentary also did not explore the relationship between landless individuals and the landed people. The script of the documentary, which was published in a local magazine (Khonj Ekhon February 2007), shows that according to film-makers the local respondents whose opinions were sought were of four categories: “*Krishak*,” “*Kishani*,” “old individuals,” and “young individuals.”⁷² In Bengali, *Krishak* means male peasant and *kishani* is a female peasant. The usage and non-usage of the category *krishak* or peasant in different representational modes, such as the ethnography-based article and the documentary-script show that the category “*krishak*” emerged in order to represent an authentic voice of the rural community. The word *krishak* is not used in the ethnography-based article because it was not set in a context where

⁷² The documentary does not mention these distinctions. The script does.

protests were taking place. The documentary which represented the protests used the words the word *krishak* as a trope. However, the documentary and the script remained silent on the supervisory nature of the *krishak*'s farming practices and their ownership of land. The documentary also did not mention about the tension between the landless and the so called "peasant." Here, I have referred to the published script of the documentary because the script shows how the filmmakers perceived the people whom they interviewed. While in the ethnography they perceive the landed as the elite and affluent villagers, almost the same individuals become poor "peasants" or *krishaks* in the documentary script and in the documentary film.

I tracked down the individuals who were shown in documentary. Most of the individuals belonged to the small landowning *Mahisya* or *Goala* or the middle caste group. The earlier chapters were mostly based on my interactions with *Goala* and *Mahisya* individuals. My host, Pareshnath Kolay, and my friend, Manik, appeared in the documentary many times, venting their grievances against land acquisition. I have explored the contradictions in their views in the earlier chapters. The documentary did not pay any attention to such tensions and contradictions within these small landholding individuals.

Next, I will depict how the filmmakers made a selection from what they saw in Singur to produce an authentic image of the village. The film was shot during the initial phases of the protests against land acquisition. There I had seen the film before I got to know many of the individuals who were interviewed in

the film. One such person was Sambhu Si. In the film, one can see Sambhu Si, a slim and bare-chested middle-aged person in *dhoti* (traditional Bengali attire: cloth covering the lower part of the body) sitting on the floor looking directly at the camera and saying, “These fields are not simply single-cropped or double-cropped (in Bengali). It grows multi-crops (sic) (in English). People grow crops rotationally. If you apply your manual labor and capital investment, it will fetch something or anything (sic) all the year round.” In the film, Sambhu Si came across as an educated and politically conscious poor peasant. He further said that transforming land into money would divide the family.

In the documentary film Sambhu Si was interviewed in his two-storied house where his family lived with his brother’s families. Among the three brothers of Sambhu Si, only one of them, Loknath Si, is a supervisory farmer. The other brothers were educated in colleges and universities and did not pursue farming. Sambhu Si himself was a graduate in English from Calcutta University. Sambhu Si’s son ran an insurance agency. His clients comprised of young men from Singur who migrated to various parts of India for jewelry and other kinds of work. The day I visited Sambhu Si’s house, Sambhu Si’s son’s brand new car was parked outside their house. I asked his son whether the filmmakers had interviewed him. The son said that they did not. The filmmakers also did not find out what the land owning villagers do apart from being part-time farmers.

Neither the documentary nor the ethnography-based article spoke about the new kinds of livelihood that have arisen in the rural areas and in Singur.

Moreover, the film did not show that a big chemical factory had been built on agricultural land very close to the site of controversy without any protest. The documentary also did not show the numerous small factories that had come up along the highway that connected the city with the villages. These silences and selections are a product of particular way of thinking about the rural, shared by the intellectuals and activists because of their common intellectual lineage that can be traced back to political movements influenced by Marxist ideas and also ideas of Indian modernity popularized by scholars and historians of the Subaltern school. This was evident in my interviews with student activists and the one of the filmmakers of the documentary that I have discussed above.

Students and Urban Left Activists

I met the student activist, Arnab, whom I interviewed at a university in Calcutta. He was a person in his twenties with spectacles, moustache and a beard. He wore a *panjabi* (traditional Indian shirt) and jeans. I went to the university campus with a friend of mine. The student's union elections at the university were fought on the issue of land acquisition and industrialization in the state. Many students had seen the documentary "Farm Land" and had gone to the villages. Arnab was giving a speech to the humanities and social sciences students in an open area near an eatery inside the campus. Many first, second, and third year students listened to Arnab's speech with rapt attention. One of

Arnab's friends and supporters introduced us to Arnab as the most knowledgeable among them.

Arnab came closer to us and shook hands with us and said, "Are you guys from the press?" I said that we are not from the press but we are independent researchers. "So, what do you want to know?" he said. I asked, "When did you come to know about the protest?" Arnab said that he first saw it on television, and then he saw the documentary, "Farm Land." I asked him whether he had gone to the villages before or if this was the first time that he went to the villages. Arnab was a bit taken aback and answered, "Well this was the first time, but you always meet people from the villages and India is a country of villages. We need not go to the villages to understand what happens there."

Arnab's impression was that the Singur villages were very prosperous because he saw many concrete houses there. I asked him if he thought the houses were built and maintained by incomes earned only from agriculture. Arnab was convinced, after seeing the documentary film that the villagers in Singur depended solely on agriculture. I asked Arnab whether he knew about any other professions and livelihoods in the villages apart from farming. Arnab said that he did not know of any other occupations in the villages. My friend Sandip asked him if he discerned any social differences within the village. Arnab replied, "Maybe there were caste differences but they have a pretty harmonious community and everybody co-operates with each other. You may say it is like a commune where everybody has a sense of obligation towards each other." Arnab

went further and said, “The state government has always tried to destroy such *gram samaj* or rural society.”

Arnab thought that industrialization would destroy the balance of the rural areas. Spread of literacy and education was required in the countryside according to Arnab, but the villagers, Arnab thought, are more interested in learning how to farm, about which the urban leaders of the ruling party and the government bureaucrats do not care to know. Arnab said that the leaders and the bureaucrats were only interested in imposing urban values and ethics on them. Any kind of planned change should emerge from the true and authentic cultural and social heritage of the rural societies, he believed. Arnab said that “the peasants” need no organizing. They organize themselves, and they know what the alternative to the capitalist model of development or manufacturing industrialization is. Arnab’s views were shared by many of his classmates with whom we talked.

One of the “Farm Land” documentary filmmakers was a doctoral candidate at a research institute in Calcutta. Sandip, my friend, who interviewed her for a local newspaper, met her at the canteen of the institute. She was surrounded by her colleagues. The moment he approached and introduced himself as journalist, the colleagues, envious of her fame as a documentary filmmaker, passed remarks to “pull her leg.” They said that she received interviewers from the press almost everyday. As he sat at the table, her colleagues left. Sandip took out the Economic and Political Weekly article from

his bag and started the conversation. He asked her why the references to the *Mahisyas* or landowning middle castes, about which she wrote in the article, were missing in the documentary. She went into a defensive mode and said that things are much more complicated than what she thought. However, she could not tackle all those complications in the documentary because the mode of representation and the audience that she had in her mind did not allow her to do so.

At this point Sandip, my friend and research assistant, asked, “What kind of audience did you have in your mind?” She said that urban students and activists were not aware of the complicated rural reality. Moreover, any mention of the complications could have led the audience to draw different kinds of conclusions and could hamper the movement. She noted that community feeling had been revived in the struggle against the government’s decision to acquire land. In that community feeling, she saw an alternative paradigm for development emerging. She thought that the director of her institute, Partha Chatterjee, a well-known academician, in his early writings suggested alternatives to the current models of development.

We next went to interview a leader of a small Leftist group who call themselves Marxist-Leninists. The Marxist-Leninists broke away from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], the dominant partner in the Left coalition called the Left Front, in the 70’s. The Marxist-Leninists campaigned against the land acquisition but endorsed land acquisition in China and Vietnam.

The leader with whom we talked was Byartho Ghosh who had been in the villages to organize the protestors. We asked him about social and “class” differences within the villages and showed him the paper written by the activists to which I have referred to above. Byartho Ghosh’s reply was that when the peasants emerge as a revolutionary class, the differences within them disappear. However, our question lingered in his mind. A month later we met him in Singur’s Beraberi village where he was addressing a gathering. Seeing me, he started saying that there are researchers who are trying to find out about the foundations of this movement against land acquisition. He asked the audience whether they were *Mahisyas*. Many in the audience responded that yes, they were *Mahisyas*. The question showed that Byartho Ghosh did not find out much about the social background of the protestors and the audience that he addressed. The answer “yes” also confirmed that many in the audience identified themselves as *Mahisyas* and as different from landless. This confirmed my point that protests in Singur were spearheaded and participated by small landholders. Later, he came to me and said that I was right, but this struggle is a nationalist struggle, so one should not harp on the differences much.

Thus, in all the above activist responses, one can identify a vague influence of Post-Developmentalist thinking popularized by the scholars of the Subaltern school and also Marxist scholars who thought that “the peasantry” is an undifferentiated group or they are un-captured by the “vices” of capitalism, and that the “the peasants” unified by their resistance would collectively bring

about change in the capitalist system. While in the case of the Leftists, the Marxist influence came from party documents, in case of students and young intellectuals the influence of Post-Developmentalist or Subaltern school-thinking came from wider dispersion of such ideas in Bengali urban intellectual life.

However, a noted scholar of the Subaltern school, Partha Chatterjee (2008), remarked that the ideas with which he and his colleagues worked in the early eighties are less valid in contemporary times. Here, I quote him from a very recent article published in *Economic and Political Weekly of India* in 2008:

The first volume of Subaltern Studies was published in 1982. I was part of the editorial group 25 years ago that launched, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, this critical engagement with Indian modernity from the standpoint of the subaltern classes, especially the peasantry. In the quarter of a century that has passed since then, there has been, I believe, a fundamental change in the situation prevailing in postcolonial India. The new conditions under which global flows of capital, commodities, information and people are now regulated – a complex set of phenomena generally clubbed under the category of globalization – have created both new opportunities and new obstacles for the Indian ruling classes. The old idea of a third world, sharing a common history of colonial oppression and backwardness, is no longer as persuasive as it was in the 1960's. The trajectory of economic growth taken by the countries of Asia has diverged radically from that of most African countries. The phenomenal growth of China and India in recent years, involving two of the most populous agrarian countries of the world, has set in motion a process of social change that, in its scale and speed, is unprecedented in human history (53).

Referring to the incidents of protests in rural Bengal, Chatterjee says:

If these incidents had taken place 25 years ago, we would have seen in them the classic signs of peasant insurgency. Here were the long familiar features of a peasantry, tied to the land and small-scale agriculture, united by the cultural and moral bonds of a local rural community, resisting the agents of an external state and of city-based commercial institutions by

using both peaceful and violent means. Our analysis then could have drawn on a long tradition of anthropological studies of peasant societies, focusing on the characteristic forms of dependence of peasant economies on external institutions such as the state and dominant classes such as landlords, moneylenders and traders, but also of the forms of autonomy of peasant cultures based on the solidarity of a local moral community (53).

Thus, the subaltern school scholar is also fighting against his own legacy that has shaped the perception of so many middle-class Bengalis who engage in romanticized activism of various sorts.

Representations of “the rural” in activist articles

Romanticized activism also spins myths around agriculture. In the next section, I will show how activist intellectuals represent the peasants, farmers, and agriculture in the articles that they wrote concerning the protests.

I will first consider historian-activist, Tanika Sarkar’s (2007), comments on industrialization and land acquisition in Singur. In a collection of essays entitled, “Singur Movement: Our Thoughts, Our Protests,”⁷³ she wrote that the modern history of India was marked by incidents, sponsored by the colonial and the post-colonial state, that dispossessed people who are dependent on forests for their livelihoods. However, referring to Singur, Sarkar wrote that a new history was being created by taking land from the people who are not traditionally marginal. Sarkar characterizes the new “land-losers” as small but well-off farmer

⁷³ Published by “Emancipation,” Calcutta. First Publication 2007, Calcutta Book Fair

families of steadily increasing rural areas of West Bengal. She was also aware of the presence of “unrecorded” sharecroppers or *bargadars* in the villages from where land was being acquired. In these ways her essay diverges from the some romantic view of the peasantry.

However, Sarkar never explored how or what made the farmer families prosperous nor what effect such prosperity had on the subjectivities of the so called “peasants.” She did not explore how the so called well-off farmers depend on the cheap labor of the unrecorded sharecroppers who are landless. Furthermore, Sarkar’s comment on the steady increase of rural areas does not stand empirical observation that reveals increasing urbanization of Singur and adjoining areas. Sarkar did not consider that the same developmental projects that appropriated land from forest-dependent people made agriculture possible in Singur. Agricultural fields in Singur receive water from canals fed by the big dams of Damodar Valley Corporation, which displaced many forest people (see Kingelsmith 2001).

Moreover, Sarkar did not see how agricultural intensification over the years in the villages of Singur had appropriated swampy land and grazing grounds on which the poorest of the poor depended.⁷⁴ Such appropriation of non- agricultural land for agriculture also leads to the loss of livelihoods and

⁷⁴ Tony Beck, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 15, 2000, wrote, “Poor people in West Bengal are being systematically excluded from customary access to common pool resources, such as swampy lands, a key element in their livelihoods, at an alarming rate. The main causes of this exclusion are **agricultural intensification**, environmental degradation, and population growth.” (2120)

increases the exploitation of ground-water, which had adverse effects on the villagers. Moreover, Sarkar never asked herself whether the prosperity of the small farmers is simply dependent on agriculture.

Thus, Sarkar's discussion of rural or the agricultural kept the question of the power of the small landholders, their desires, and exploitation of nature outside its analytical framework. Sarkar's representational practices remind one of Sidney Mintz's (1985: xxvii) comments on early anthropological monographs. The following remark made by Mintz aptly describes the process that operates in many of the activist writings on West Bengali villages: "By some strange sleight of hand, one anthropological monograph after another whisks out of view any signs of the present and how it came to be." Sarkar's account, like early anthropological writings did not consider change or how change affects practices and the experience of becoming "modern."

Following Mintz (1985: xxvii), I would also say that the problem is not an outright suppression of data so much as unwillingness to take such data into account theoretically. What Mintz said about the anthropologists is equally applicable to the activists. As I have shown in an earlier section, the documentary filmmakers were aware of the realities in the village. Yet, their documentary did not reflect that. Sarkar is also probably aware of the changes that had been taking place in rural West Bengal, yet she chooses to ignore certain crucial aspects of rural society because the activist theoretical repertoire does not give her the opportunity to engage with subtleties of change and subjectivity.

Another activist piece, by Bolan Gangopadhyay, starts with a description of the road to Singur from Calcutta. She describes the scenic beauty of the agricultural fields around the highway. However, never once does she mention that there are also numerous factories and gas-stations along the road. Bolan Gangopadhyay acknowledges distinctions between well-off sections and poorer sections of the rural community. She writes that the well-off sections would like to give up land but the poorer sections are dependent on land although they may own little land themselves. In her view, many of these poor villagers are unregistered sharecroppers and usually depend on grazing goats. She argues that the regime no longer requires the support of the poor peasants, i.e. the poor people dependent on land, and its policies are based on its support from a well-off section.

Although Bolan Gangopadhyay tried to grapple with the complexity of the situation, her account was also full of simplifications. First, she did not take into account that the landholding sizes are dwindling. Sub-division of land has made many erstwhile well-off families poor. Moreover, among the sharecroppers, there are two groups. There was one group of recorded sharecroppers who wield more power than the landowner because the landowner cannot evict them and cannot sell the land without their permission. The registered sharecroppers usually belong to the middle caste groups, and they usually also own land. The unregistered sharecroppers and tillers are the most disadvantaged sections of the rural society. This section of the population,

as I revealed in the last chapter, are also not completely dependent on agriculture because they usually go to work in nearby factories and many from this group joined the construction work at the factory site.

An academician by the name of Pranab Kanti Basu wrote in *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 7, 2007) that the culture of commodities is completely alien to the “the peasants” in Singur. In a footnote, he writes that his remarks are based on the interviews that activists did in Singur. I quote a passage from the essay here:

They led a life that quite satisfied their material and cultural demands. For this they were totally dependent on their plots of land. It was as much a part of their culture and life, as it was a means of livelihood. The peasants had a holistic culture that directly opposed the commodity culture of globalisation. The concept of land as a commodity was thoroughly alien to their culture. From our cultural perspective, which refuses any holistic or ecological position, we can invent a justification of their stand: loss of land will deprive the peasants of the opportunity to work (which is the realization of human existence), even if they can earn sufficient interest income from the monetary compensation without doing any work (1283).

Next, I discuss how the visits and intervention of the urban activists in the villages also shaped the understanding of the situation for many villagers. For example, activists spread rumors that a factory may not come up on the acquired land. Many activists saw deeper conspiracy in the project. They spread rumors that by taking up agricultural land, multinational companies are trying to create a food shortage so that the villagers must depend on the multinational companies even for food. I will quote from an activist brochure published by

“People’s Coalition on Food Sovereignty,” which claimed that the Tata company is not going to build a factory but would instead run a real estate business:

The acquisition of such a huge land area signifies that the Tata may turn these lands into a real estate venture in the near future, like what the Birlas are planning on the 314 acres of land in Hind Motors, according to a section of business observers. Hind Motors is owned by C.K. Birlas and it was set up in 1942 as manufacturing plant on 743 acres of land in Uttarpara, West Bengal. With this huge land, Hind Motors has expanded into a huge town with residential housing and other facilities (Ghosh and Lahiri 2006: 21).⁷⁵

The brochure suppressed the fact that the land was being leased out to the Tata Motors for the purpose of building the factory unlike the land that was donated to Hind Motors when the Congress regime was in power. Such statements affected the perceptions of the villagers, who thought the government is facilitating Tata motors to acquire land cheaply from them, and then it would sell the land at a higher price to other buyers. The same brochure, like the other activist documents, remained silent on the changing livelihoods of the villagers. I will quote from the brochure again:

The survival and livelihoods of the peasants are closely related to the land and the agriculture that they practice. They come from generations of farmers and their skills and knowledge have been acquired through the decades of understanding, working and sustaining the land and the surrounding natural resources. These are what they know and do well. Their skills are not suitable for other occupation. Thus, they will lose their access to food producing resources such as land and this could result in hunger and starvation (Ghosh and Lahiri 2006: 22).

⁷⁵ “Our land, their development: A report on Singur” by Arpita Ghosh and D.P. Lahiri, August 2006.

The international NGO “People’s Coalition for Food Sovereignty” operated in West Bengal through a local organization that had its office in Jodhpur Park in Calcutta. I had an opportunity to befriend one of their field level workers who looked after their activities in Singur. The person’s name was Raju Mukherjee. Raju-*babu* (honorific) as I called him, was an erstwhile Naxalite i.e., an ultra-Leftist Maoist. The website of their organization also says that the organization was set up by the erstwhile Maoists. Raju Mukherjee had many contradictions in his opinion about the incidents that were taking place in Singur. He said that the villages in Singur were proper Gandhian villages, “They keep everything for their subsistence and only the surplus is sold outside.” Mukherjee also said, “If you would like to learn about sustainable farming practices, you must go to Singur.” I had asked him whether he knew about other kinds of occupations in Singur. Raju Mukherjee said that the peasants did not tell them about other occupations. He said, “We have very authentic information about the rural livelihoods in Singur.”

Several weeks later when I told him that farmers in Singur use Green Revolution technologies and pesticides, and that some of them are getting used to biotechnologically modified seeds, Raju Mukherjee smiled and replied, “Sometimes it is necessary to say certain things to keep the government under pressure.” Raju Mukherjee was also aware of the fact that farming in Singur depended on heavy ground water exploitation. He said that there are a group of “water barons” who thrive on distributing water to the farmlands and that they

are the ones who are encouraging many people to join the protest. Raju Mukherjee was in touch with many small farmers who would like to have bargained for a better price for their land. However, these small landholding villagers did not have any other language to express their desires publicly except the activist rhetoric of preservation of livelihood and “indigenous ways of life.”

From the same brochure or report, I cite photograph and its caption in the brochure that reflects the contradiction:



Fig. 6.1 The above photograph has been taken from the activist brochure: “Our land, their Development: A report on Singur,” by Arpita Ghosh and D.P. Lahiri (2006: 22). The caption of this photograph was the following: “Keeping with their ancient traditions the village women welcomed us by blowing conch-shells”

The same brochure recommends, "In the open market system, Tata could purchase the land from the farmers directly. In this case, the government has played the role of an intermediary or a broker with the rapid industrialization in West Bengal as one of its agenda. However, this agenda must take into consideration the impact of industrialization on the lives of farming communities." This suggestion in the final pages of the report contradicted what the report had been arguing about loss of culture and livelihoods. Would a direct selling of land to the Tata company, bypassing the government, save the villagers from loss of livelihoods or culture? I interpret such contradictions as the influence of collusion or an "implicit understanding" between the small landholding villagers who wanted a better price for their land and the NGO officials who visited and wrote the report. The small landowning villagers are used to selling land to local middle men with whom they enter into a dialogue. Language to speak with the state in a situation where so many of the villagers were involved was alien to the small landholding villagers. They wanted themselves to be represented either by the opposition political party or by NGOs. The opposition political parties had their own agenda and so had the NGOs that have been trying to push their goal of "food sovereignty." The contradiction within the villagers' subjectivities therefore finds expression in the NGO report.

I will give another instance of how the urban activists record the contradictory voices of the villagers, yet completely ignore it or present it as an unproblematic response from the villagers. The title of the publication is

“Fairytale of Development: Details of Singur,” published in 2006 and the publisher was an activist group called “Citizen’s Forum.” The booklet starts with the following narrative about the villagers:

They do not contrive their responses. They speak their mind. We were there for nine hours. We had gone to various places in Singur. We roamed, we heard and we witnessed the life in the Singur villages. We carried movie camera, tape recorder and we had our willingness to know and learn. We knew about Singur like many others yet there is something still left to be told and make people know. We begin with their words. We are providing what they say and what we would like to say side by side. We do not claim that we are saying the last words (4).

After the above narrative, a section begins with the following title: “In ‘Rustic’ words of the villagers.” I am quoting a passage from the section here:

Land is our mother.

If they say we are giving you ten lakh rupees give us one of your sons – can we give away our son?

Our plot is never empty. We did not go to the Chief Minister to ask for money to pay dowry for my daughter. We cannot do without land. If we have to die, we will die. What are we going to eat? How are we going to bring up our kids? They are giving us two lakhs for every *bigha*. We have two *bighas*, that means we are going to earn 4 lakhs. We have earned that money from land and built our houses. And we have spent money on getting our daughter married. What price are they going to pay us for our land? Land is our mother. We are not going to sell our land whatever the price they offer.

Our son is learning how to be a motor mechanic. We would like our son to have garage of his own, so that he can independently earn something after learning to work. (4)

In the above narrative the activists never asked how the dowry for the daughter's marriage was paid. As I have shown before, most of the time the dowry money came from selling land. The speculative value of land is the key to social status in the villages. Second the activists also did not ask why the son wanted to become a motor mechanic; if agriculture gives them so much wealth, why was he learning other kinds of work? The answer to these questions would have complicated the picture the activists were trying to paint through the narratives of the villagers. Many village youngsters did not like to work on the farms; they got trained as motor mechanics or jewelers, but as I revealed in the earlier chapters, there were not many such jobs readily available. The above activist interview with the villagers suggests that there was also a desire to see more motor cars on the village roads and other kinds of things that come with urbanization so that the younger generation can thrive by doing some kind of non-farm work. The activists also did not ask whether the son-in-law's family is agricultural. My own interviews reveal that a good bride-groom was considered to be the one who is not employed in agriculture.

There were also contradictions in different activist writings about the villagers with whom they talked during their visits to the village. In the above booklet, to which I have just referred, the village women were quoted as saying "We want to work independently in our land as farmer's wife, as farmer's daughter and as farmers ourselves. The people who have given up land are not farmers. They do not have any relationship with land; they work outside" (4).

Another activist ethnography(2006)⁷⁶ based on a day's stay in the same village and in the same neighborhoods reports somewhat differently. These activists said that they could talk to the men only because they went on a weekend. Their account reports that most of the men get up early in the morning to recruit laborers to work in their field and they go to work outside the villages. During mid-day, the ethnography reports, the wives usually go to the field to supervise the laborers.

Therefore, the obvious questions that these two somewhat contradictory reports raise are the following: What do the women mean when they say that they work in the field? By working in the field they mean that they supervise farm laborers in the field. Sometimes they help their husbands reap the crop and other vegetables in the absence of farm laborers. Dependence on non-farm employment in the villages is either not mentioned or it is represented as unproblematic.

Participation of women in the protests was also read by the activists as remnants of pre-capitalist ways of life where men and women participated in production equally and had a strong community feeling. However, the women from small landholding households in Singur participated in the movement partly because the men usually left the villages to work outside. In the absence of men, women managed the agriculture and supervised laborers in the field but rarely did the labor-intensive tasks. Women also participated in the protest for a

⁷⁶ Published in Anustup, December 2006, p.14 -61

strategic reason; the presence of women drew urban and media attention. In front of the camera or to the reporters, the women would usually say that they were farmers like their husbands and they worked in the field. The more complex reality is that many women also got married to households that own land because if the husband dies, the ownership of land would help them earn money by employing laborers.

Many male villagers would tell me, pointing to the women, "See the women; they usually do not come out of their houses so much. They are so desperate they have come to the streets to protest. The government should try to understand the desperation." I would ask, "If they do not come out of houses, how do they go to the field to work?" The men and older women would reply that "we do not allow young and middle aged women, our *bahus*, to go to the field; we go. It is a shame to let your women work in the field. Poor people let their women work in the field." Here, by poor people, the women referred not only to the day laborers who work in their fields but also to poor, near landless, households in their villages, i.e. of their own caste groups.

The complexity of the situation could never be represented in the activists narratives aimed at opposing industrialization or capitalism through romanticized images of rural social life. The activist narratives that present the "peasant women" as speaking their mind tend to ignore the calculative and utilitarian aspects of protests. Here, I will again quote Partha Chatterjee (2008) who contrasts the current incidents of protest with what Ranajit Guha (1985)

described in his Subaltern studies classic, "Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India." Although he comments on use of violence, I quote him here to show that even the Subaltern scholar is aware of the activist misreadings of protest practices.

...(u)nlike the old forms of peasant insurgency which characterized much of the history of peasant society for centuries, there is, I believe, a quite different quality in the role of violence in contemporary peasant politics. While subaltern peasant revolts of the old kind had their own notions of strategy and tactics, they were characterized, as Ranajit Guha showed in his classic work, by strong community solidarity on the one side and negative opposition to the perceived exploiters on the other. Today, the use of violence in peasant agitations seems to have a far more calculative, almost utilitarian logic, designed to draw attention to specific grievances with a view to seeking appropriate governmental benefits. A range of deliberate tactics are followed to elicit the right responses from officials, political leaders and especially the media. This is probably the most significant change in the nature of peasant politics in the last two or three decades.

The activists' narratives and representation that avoid the complexities on the ground tried to create an opposition between wider processes of globalizing the Indian economy and the village society or the economy. The activist strategies of representations are reminiscent of what historian Manu Goswami (2004) sees as a flaw in Partha Chatterjee's (1993) "Nation and its Fragments." Manu Goswami says that Chatterjee, in his interpretation of Indian nationalism, tended to reify an "indigenous domain" as repository of pure difference.

Although Chatterjee changed his view (2008), the activists continued this reification of difference. They reified the different and contradictory voices in the village and thereby created an authentic voice of the villagers as purely different

from urban or mainstream Indian society. This pure difference created incommensurability between the land to be acquired and any kind of compensation and rehabilitation. Activist ethnographies and narratives could have actually benefited the villagers and protestors if the rural and the urban protestors had gone into a dialogue with the state government in drawing up of and implementation of a comprehensive package for the villagers who were affected by the acquisition. Rather, a narrative of the penetration of global capital facilitated by the state destroying a harmonious “peasant” culture dominated the activism of urban intellectual radical and Left intellectuals.

Such a narrative of penetration can be found more clearly in the writings of a theater worker/activist Saonli Mitra (2007) who explained women’s participation in terms of women’s closeness to nature and accused the state of introducing machine civilization in the villages. In her writing on the incidents in Singur, this activist-theater worker draws a parallel between nature and women to explain the women’s participation in the protests against land acquisition. The following passage appeared in, “Singur Movement: Our Thoughts and Our Protests.”

To keep the process of creation uninterrupted, nature has given the women the ability to bear the child. Thus, women bear the pain of giving birth to babies. Women suffer from various kinds of bodily pain due to this biological function that her organs play in the process of creation. She becomes mother. Like the nature which grows crops with love and care and makes us prosperous through flowers and fruits, women give birth to life. Nature gives milk in mother’s breasts to nurture the baby. It does not give milk to the father. It is because of such mysterious power that the women have to suffer in the hands of men. So does nature. Is it true that

the men think that women are of inferior kind? Men think that they are superior because they cannot be raped. Or is it true that men suffer from an inferiority complex because the women have the power of creation? Maybe none of this is true because in tribal societies there are no incidents of rape. Which one is true? It seems what Rabindranath Tagore said about civilization is true that machine civilization turns human beings into blind monsters. Machine civilizations destroy the natural rhythm of social and family life. Because it interrupts the easy breathing, human beings breathe with difficulty. Modern life and development destroys the balance in the relationship between the men and women who work in the field together. Thus, carnal pleasures become more important than love. Commodities such as comfortable socks, cream, and soaps are all enhancing the pleasure of sex. These commodities and their advertisements make people so enchanted that they forget about their own development. Thus, the administration, political parties and corporations decide for the people what development is. People lose the abilities to understand what is good or bad for them. Commercial films and cheap advertisements create the desire among people to get rich quick in a much planned way. These films and advertisements create an indomitable urge in people to get rich quick. All these turn people's attention away from the paucity of electricity and medical supplies in government hospitals and lack of infrastructure in science laboratories (49).

In the above narrative, the provincial government has been accused of introducing machine civilization that destroys the natural and organic balance between human ways of life and nature. However, the narrative very carefully notes that people or villagers themselves have desires for commodities and goods. However, these desires are surreptitiously produced by the advertisements and the administration to turn their attention away from how people are not getting the benefits of modern amenities such as medical care and electricity. The narrative never questions the fact that electricity and modern medical care also requires the machine civilization that it denounces.



Fig.6.2 Nagarik Mancha Poster (2006:6) published in “Fairytale of Development: Details of Singur,” showing the penetration of machine and destroying the mother earth.

What one sees in this narrative is a tension between a universalistic vision of development and particularistic vision of the rural and village life. This contradiction is reminiscent of the contradiction that characterized Indian nationalism, as Manu Goswami (2004) shows. Manu Goswami finds that Indian nationalism had a territorial nativist envisioning of *bharat* or India as an organic national whole. Yet nationalists, Goswami contends, harbored faith in forging a uniquely pacific path of industrialization without the contradictions that come with industrialization. Thus, Ranabir Samaddar, an activist and an intellectual said, “Even a baby would understand that industries are required but we must find out an alternative route to industrialization” (personal interview). The

alternative route envisioned by activists like Ranabir Samaddar appear as a state socialist model of development.

Many activists also blame the Marxist regime for not coming up with an alternative. For example, Tanika Sarkar (2007) the historian, thought that the Left regime's adoption of a neoliberal industrial model would jeopardize the search for an alternative at the national level. Sarkar also cites a reason why the Left Front in West Bengal could not come up with an alternative. The reason she gives is that because of repeated victory of the Left Front in West Bengal, the party or the regime has been corrupted by people who do not strictly abide by or follow Left ideologies. Sarkar calls these elements "*benojal*" or "bad water" that made the regime and the party impure. Similarly, another activist and theater worker said that earlier the Party used to hold classes among its cadres to teach them about Marxism and how to become a good Marxist in one's personal life. These days they do not do that anymore, which has led to unruly and undisciplined cadres who are only into making money.

What these intellectual-activists repeatedly complained about was that the Marxist party has not been able to cultivate an ethical subject-position among its followers, which would turn them away from global influences. By participating in a democratic polity and competing with other parties, the party had ethically transformed itself and become "impure" like all other political parties. However, the intellectual activists simultaneously hold the Marxist party responsible for coming up with an alternative because the party has a huge mass base among the

rural population. What the intellectual activists did not seem to realize is that wider acceptance of a Marxist party has been possible precisely because it has moved away from the strict Marxist principles in order to compete with other parties in an electoral democracy and accommodate individuals with various kinds of interests, aspirations, and desires, which the ultra-Left activists think are impure elements.

None of the activist narratives reflect on the farming practices and the dwindling landholding size of Singur and changing subjectivities of the villagers of different economic and social backgrounds. The dwindling landholding sizes lead to over-exploitation of ground water due to more intensive cultivation. Such over-exploitation of ground water has given rise to arsenic contamination in various parts of West Bengal, although not in Singur. However, continuous ground water exploitation is not a very sustainable practice. Activist narratives did not address these complex and difficult questions; rather, they had very simplistic answers to such complex problems. For example, Medha Patkar, in her speech in Singur, said that she wanted villagers in Singur to cultivate their field but not by using water from big dams. She wanted them to irrigate their fields by water-harvesting and small canals. She did not even care to find out that the land is actually irrigated in Singur by both ground water exploitation and by using water from the big dams. Both of these practices would be unsustainable by Medha Patkar's environmentalist standards.

Conclusion

The narratives that activists had spun through their ethnography and representation is what Haripriya Rangan (1999) calls “local narratives of sustainability.” Local narratives of sustainability, Rangan notes, begin by identifying the crisis in ecology or the economy as stemming from activities—production, consumption, exchange, and waste—that occur on a global scale. According to this perspective, the insatiable drive of global commerce and capitalism is causing irreversible damage to localities and fragile ecosystems in every part of the world. The delicate balance of the earth’s ecosystem and human relationships is irrevocably harmed by governments that provide succor to global forces of capitalism and commerce in the name of economic development, threatening the survival of local communities. Solutions to such encroachment and penetration of global forces can only be found in preserving the local communities, their livelihoods and ecosystems. Government should limit the powers of global commerce and organize social life within localities that are bound together by the subsistence ethic and communal sharing of political and ecological responsibility. It is the global forces that are corrupting; the local villagers are desire-less actors.

One may, however, say that narratives of development, neoliberalism and globalization must be countered with other kinds of narratives. If narratives can bring together people against the government or the administration, there is nothing wrong with that. Participation in protests and adopting certain political

positions based on such narratives may also change the subjectivities and self-understandings of the villagers. While the latter statements are important points, the activists, especially urban activists, usually forget that the narratives of development and globalization i.e. narratives on which capitalism operates, are much stronger because capitalism reconfigures local particularities and uses local differences to spread its ambit.

Thus, what appears as outside the capitalist hegemony is very much inside it. The narratives that romanticize the local protests work because they help protestors to engage in protest practices that work with certain kinds of regimes or what Žižek () says pseudo-concrete enemy figures. For example, in the case of Singur the protest strategies worked well to produce a critique of the Marxist government. However, such narratives produce banal observations regarding the complexity of the social processes, the interrelatedness of places and events, and local global connections.

The construction of authentic voices of “the peasants” is also rooted in utopian projects and counter-narratives. The counter-narratives and utopian projects tend to counter the unilinear narratives of development and globalization by creating narratives based on ideas of a self-sufficient community. The idealized community becomes the standpoint for critiquing globalization and big corporate capital. In doing this, the urban activists are faced with obvious dilemmas as I have shown in this chapter. They encounter a rural reality that is different from what they imagine or want to imagine. The

unevenness or fragmentations that characterize the rural or the peasant cannot be represented in terms of the activist vocabulary that is tuned to constructing a *gemeinschaft*-like totality diametrically opposed to the *gesellschaft*-like totality that capitalism tries to create.

However, what the activists tend not to understand is that both the ideas of *gemeinschaft* and the *gesellschaft* are peculiarly modern and the former emerges as the latter's double. Thus, Bebbington (1996) warns that counter-narratives must be constructed from practice and grounded in the aspiration of the popular actors. The dilemma is that, Bebbington notes, these aspirations have incorporated the experience of modernity and development. Those in the business of utopias and counter-narratives must be careful before rejecting the popular aspirations as false consciousness. Similarly, anthropologist William Roseberry (1985) says that though an ordered rural past serves as a critical counterpoint to the disordered capitalist present, the construction of an emergent culture that can serve a "proletarian" consciousness must begin with lived experience.

Thus, there is the notion of "no piecemeal solution is out of place" in the contemporary world (Gledhill 1999). Piecemeal solutions will provide the actual content of the forms of the new kinds of struggles against the neoliberal policies that tend to favor big corporations and hurt small scale livelihoods and place-based ways of life. The challenge then is to build short-term, pragmatic, and realistic responses that work from contemporary contexts and lived experiences

and do so in a way that is coherent with and builds towards longer-term utopias that are already immanent within the strategies and hopes of popular sectors. In the Singur case short term solutions would have entailed a dialogue on compensation and rehabilitation packages.

I would like to end this chapter with a quote from anthropologist George A. Collier's (1994) book on the Zapatista Rebellion in Mexico. His book was published by the same NGO, Food First International, to whose local collaborators, "People's Coalition for Food Sovereignty," I have referred to above. Collier writes:

I think we misrepresent peasants, if we allow ourselves to view them in simplistic terms – as either passive victims of the state or as “noble savages” who can reinvigorate modern society with egalitarian and collective values. By acknowledging tensions and differences in peasant communities, we face up to both virtue and the vice inherent in peasants' exercise of power over one another, and we integrate individual agency into understanding of peasant communities (9).

It is this individual and collective agency of the villagers that I have emphasized in trying to understand the complexity of the protests. I believe, we need to recognize this individual and collective agency in order to bring various movements together.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: Paradoxes, Dilemmas and Isolated Protests.

The dissertation began by presenting two paradoxes. The first paradox was the adoption of neoliberal industrialization policy by a Marxist regime, which has been ideologically opposed to neoliberal policies. The second paradox was how the actions of the state seemed both justified and unjustified at the same time to villagers involved in protests and counter-protests. In order to explore the paradoxes and answer the questions that they raise the dissertation has complicated the image of “the peasant”, “the rural,” “the protests,” and the small land-holder’s relationship with land through an ethnography.

In this conclusion, I will try to engage with the questions that the paradoxes raise. One of the questions was why did the Left regime of the state of West Bengal in India, which has been opposed to neoliberal policies at the central or the federal scale, adopt neoliberal industrial policies in the province which they ruled. I claimed in the introduction that the dissertation may also throw some light on the phenomena which has become very commonplace not only in Asia but also in Latin America: Left of the center regimes, ideologically opposed to favoring large capitalists, invites big corporations to set up industries and in doing so gives them incentives that undermine the rights of farmers, workers or other citizens. The paradoxes and questions have been mostly addressed in terms of double-standards of regime leadership, quirky policy changes, or conjunctural accidents or external pressures. While these explanations are all important and valid, they need to be complemented by ethnographic exploration of social and

political life at particular sites. The basic assumption in such an exploration is that social life can be seen as what Sherry Ortner (2006:130) calls a “serious game.” A serious game constitutes of individuals and groups who are the actors in a game, which they actively play, and their actions or moves are oriented towards culturally constituted goals and projects. The actions entail routine practices, intentions, desires and aspirations, which are deeply embedded in local relationships of power and identity formation.

My goal in this dissertation has been to shift the focus of explanation of large-scale social and cultural processes to micro-processes of power and identity formation. This strategy of starting with larger events and then trying to work backwards towards their “serious games” is what Ortner (2006) identifies as the ultimate purpose of an engaged anthropology. An ethnographic focus on the serious games within the social field is not a substitute for a theory of large-scale social and cultural processes. Rather the social field is influenced by (or is placed within) these large-scale processes.

The exploration of social field and serious games, I believe, will help us move beyond the apparent paradoxes, which sustain misconceptions about larger processes such as the spread of neoliberal globalization which favors big capitalists. The misconceptions are represented by two views: first, that the acceptance of neoliberal policies by regimes across the board is an indication that neoliberalization or neoliberal globalization is an inevitable process; second, the view that neoliberal policies are simply impositions of the state and its

leadership, which try to address the elitist urges of mimicking the West or wealthier countries.

These views are based on or supported by, as I have argued in the fourth chapter, a superficial understanding of agency of individuals and groups and the so called “peasants” who are portrayed as either victims of larger processes or as heroes who resist the processes of globalization or industrialization. Going beyond such dualistic understanding requires recognizing the agency of the villagers. I find Sherry Ortner’s (2006) definition and discussion of agency particularly helpful in summing up what I have argued in this dissertation.

Building on the works of Laura Ahearn (2000), William Sewell (1980) and Anthony Giddens (1973), Ortner defines agency in terms of two abilities that actors have. First is the ability of individuals and groups to pursue culturally defined projects and to desire and aspire. Second is their ability to act within social inequality, asymmetry and force. Ortner terms the former ability as “agency of project” and the latter as “agency of power” and says that these are intertwined in a Moebius-type relationship. The urban activists in this study tend to understand agency of the subaltern groups in terms of the latter i.e. “agency of power” and that too only in terms of resistance to big industries or globalization or the state. But the action of resistance to the project, as I have shown in the preceding chapters, has to be understood in terms of embeddedness of such protests in a deep history of a culturally and politically constituted expectations and self-understanding. This means that one has to understand the projects and

desires of small landholding villagers, and how such self-understandings and desires are products of their moderately dominant position in the rural social hierarchy and their relationship with the state or the regime. The protests and counter protests—the second paradox—are expressions of this intertwining of the two kinds of agencies. The location of the Tata factory in the Singur villages came in the way of various individual projects that families, individuals and households had with their land. But the factory also created the possibility of realizing the projects and desires for non-farm employment. Thus protesting against the factory was one expression of agency of power vis-à-vis the state but the ambivalence towards the factory and a general desire to derive benefits from it, directly or indirectly, were also another expression of “agency of power,” which sought to maintain the middle class or *moddhyobitto* status of the small landholders. The landless and near landless individuals were also desperate for non-farm work.

The “exceptional” framework of understanding, proposed by Aihwa Ong and the “accumulation by dispossession” trope, popularized by Harvey (mentioned in the introduction) are powerful frameworks but in order to fully understand the paradoxes one has to look at the complex identities and contradictions in subjectivities formed around ownership of land and within the dominant governmental techniques of the socialist or Leftist regimes. A refusal to attend to such complexities produces a “romanticized resistance.” This romanticized resistance simply inverts the over-determined modernization-

loving subjects that a highmodernist Marxist regime presupposes to implement its industrialization policy. In place of overdetermined subjects, romanticized resistance of the post-developmentalists presupposes an under-determined “peasant” subjects based on an essentialist understanding of culture. This essentialist view of culture emphasizes a natural unmediated or pre-mediated relationship between villagers, land and history rather than a politically and socially mediated relationship, based on identities, differences and aspirations.

The urban activists and local protestors try to construct a unified and homogenous voice out of the maze of different kinds of opinions, conflicts and contradictions on the basis of an “authentic” voice of the peasant who rejects industrialization, development and modernity. This strategy has proved to be very effective in challenging the hegemony of the Marxist regime, which has been identified as the “neoliberal left” like that of the Workers Party in Brazil. But this construction of authenticity may not be very effective in curbing the power of large capitalists.

It is very difficult for activist politics, which is oriented towards opposing globalization or industrialization at particular sites, to take into account the complexity of the situation and consider the desires and aspirations of the actors on the ground or, in Ortner’s terms, to recognize the “agency of project” of the subaltern actors, which is generated in the context of larger forces and processes. Any similarity or likenesses between state projects and “projects of the subaltern actors” are interpreted by the activists as products of false consciousness. Hence

activists' criticisms and attacks are confined to the authorities, which are immediately responsible for delivering development. While such criticisms and attacks change regimes and challenge the legitimacy and hegemony of particular political parties, as they have very effectively done in the case of West Bengal, the larger processes and forces that favor accumulation of profits by capitalists go unchallenged or get deeply entrenched. In the 2009 parliamentary elections in India the candidates of the ruling Marxist party suffered a humiliating defeat. But the opposition parties that won the seats are allies of the liberalizing Congress Party, which through its policies will further reinforce the economic and legal framework that benefits the big capitalists, for example, privatization of public enterprises and the insurance sector. The activist Left parties or organizations, which have been vociferous in the critique of the unmarxist actions of the Marxist government could never manage to win supporters across the political and economic spectrum nor could they use the democratic set-up successfully. The outcome of the latter has been expressed by Perry Anderson (2008) as a conundrum: "the size of India is such that all these expressions of resistance against the effects of neoliberal policies coexist within a still stable and increasingly neo-liberal state" (10).

The isolated protests reinforce the regional disparities in industrialization within India (i.e. between the western provinces of Gujarat and Maharashtra and eastern provinces of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) that has been created by the Freight Equalization Policy and trade union politics. Tata Company's decision to

move to Sanand in the western Indian province of Gujarat clearly shows that the activism in West Bengal simply led to further industrialization of Gujarat where people from eastern part of India migrate in search of work. This disparity in industrialization within India helps large capitalists because non- industrialized and less industrialized parts of India provide cheap migrant labor for factories in the industrialized parts of India. These migrant laborers who provide cheaper labor than the local western Indian population often become targets of ethnic riots.⁷⁷

A reason behind the inability of the Leftist and Post-Developmentalist urban activists to come up with a proper strategy to unite isolated protests and expressions of resistance has been their myopic view of rural India and an unwillingness to confront the complexities that arise from dwindling land holding size and a desire for “improvement.” Therefore, I suggest that in order to form an inclusive movement and in order to bring movements together the urban activists, Leftists, or Post-Developmentalists have a very important role to play. However, they must confront the complexities among people whom they seek to represent. Struggle or resistance at one site or scale will contribute to the continuing hegemony of capital or capitalism rather than challenge it, which I strongly believe should be the goal of the politics of emancipation.

⁷⁷ Biharis, residents of Bihar, eastern Indian province have been targeted by the Maharashtrians under the leadership of Shiv Sena.

Bringing isolated movements for social justice together is a problem that has received much theoretical attention in recent years. For example, David Harvey (2008: 37) writes that signs of rebellion are everywhere.⁷⁸ Harvey notes that although there are many radical social movements that try to promote social justice around the world, these movements are not tightly coupled; indeed most have no connection to each other. Harvey laments, “Unfortunately the social movements are not strong enough or sufficiently mobilized to put forward singular demands” (38). I have argued in the second chapter that the theoretical framework that sees the primary cause of the movements as resisting “accumulation by dispossession” can be a useful point of departure, but to discern the complexity of these movements, we need to look at how the discourse of improvement shapes the identities of individuals and groups. Therefore, theoretical insights should be matched with an ethnographic exploration of why the complexity of the movements is missed by the urban intellectuals and activists who play an important role in tying up or unifying various local movements.

Nonetheless, theoretical insights have helped formulate the problem of unifying several isolated movements in terms of the question of political agency, which make them very useful points of departure to understand activists and

⁷⁸ Although Harvey does not specify the rebellions and movements to which he refers, we can guess that he is referring to many protests against privatization, land acquisition, and private capital that are being waged all over the world.

activism. For example, Malcolm Bull (2005: 19) describes the current political impasse in the following way:

Within contemporary radical politics, there are a lot of questions to which there are many possible answers, and one question to which there is none. There are innumerable blueprints for utopian futures that are, in varying degrees, egalitarian, cosmopolitan, ecologically sustainable, and locally responsive, but no solution to the most intractable problem of all: who is going to make it happen?

To the above question, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2004) answer has been the "*Multitude*." For Hardt and Negri, the "*multitude* is all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially as the class of those who refuse the rule of capital (102)." The multitude is characterized by its multiplicity and diversity, which resists unity and imposed leadership. Nonetheless, Hardt and Negri (2004) assert that the *multitude* works in a coordinated fashion. Taking a cue from the idea of swarm intelligence, Hardt and Negri (2004) argue that coordination comes from a collective intelligence that emerges from cooperation and communication. The vagueness and ambiguity of the concept of *multitude* has been much commented on (see Bull 2005). Yet Hardt and Negri's ideas seem reflected in the minds of many radical activists who see the protests simply in terms of cooperation among peasants and villagers and urban workers.

One of my activist informants, a student of Jadavpur University in Kolkata, pointed out that "the peasants" need no organizing. They organize themselves, and they know what the alternative to the capitalist model of development or manufacturing industrialization is. The young activist's

romanticized vision of “the peasants” is not very different from Hardt and Negri’s ideas of a *multitude*. The only difference was that for Hardt and Negri, *multitude* emerges out of an intensification of capitalist relations that deterritorialize individuals from their cultural moorings; the so called “peasants” in West Bengal are not deterritorialized in Hardt and Negri’s sense because they have rights to land and they can also make claims on the regime, political parties and the state. Yet, the striking similarity between Hardt and Negri and the student activist is that there is a belief in the natural abilities of coordinated action of “the peasants” that will spread from villages of West Bengal to villages across India and finally to rest of the world.

According to Malcolm Bull, Hardt and Negri’s depiction of multitude is nothing but another expression of the invisible hand of Adam Smith. Hardt and Negri, Bull (2005) suggests, distinguish multitude from the “people,” which suggests unity of identity and will. The “people” is a well defined and homogenous collective entity that strictly defines its exterior. The “people” is prepared for sovereignty and every nation must make people out of the *multitude*.

However, for Ernesto Laclau (2005), the category of the “people” does not necessarily always merge with the nation. The “people” emerges out of matrix of open and contingent struggle for hegemony (Laclau 2005: 95). The smallest unit of Laclau’s populism is the category of social demand in the double meaning of the term—a request and a claim. The “people” for Laclau is the collective actor

who demands or makes a claim, i.e. the people is constituted through raising a demand (2005: 96). The “people” is the performative result of making a demand and not a pre-existing group (2005: 95). While Laclau’s theoretical discussion gives eminence to the term people, actual content of the people may vary and “the peasants” can as well come to occupy the status of “the people” because a unified “peasant” identity is formed only in the struggle. Consequently, protests against land acquisition and the protests against the Nano factory can also be described as populist.

However, Slavoj Žižek (2005: 21) notes that in populist logic there is “constitutive mystification.” Populism’s basic gesture, Žižek (2005) notes, is a refusal to confront the complexity of the situation and to reduce the protests to clear struggles against a pseudo-concrete enemy figure. In the case of my field site, the pseudo-concrete enemy figure that has come to stand for all the evils of capitalism is the ruling provincial Marxist regime.⁷⁹ Populism, Žižek (2005: 21) contends is a negative phenomenon grounded in a refusal. Žižek (2005) goes on to prescribe that emancipatory projects must avoid all kinds of populism. Žižek’s critique of populism must be taken seriously, especially because concrete populisms cannot survive without constructing some kind of prior content in an oppositional relationship with the dominant narratives. If the dominant narrative is that industrialization is a necessity, populist movements tend to construct a

⁷⁹ The regime is responsible for rampant nepotism because it favors its own cadres and party workers, but a provincial regime cannot be seen as the sole agent of capitalism.

self-sufficient rural community as a counterpoint to the dominant discourse or narrative of industrialization that government tends to promote.

The greatest impediment to populist movements coming together is that they construct a pseudo-concrete enemy figure that cannot be globalized and used in other situations and contexts. For example, the protests against land acquisition in Singur could not be used to contest the power of big corporations in the rest of India because the critique of the ruling Marxists at the provincial scale empowered the parties which are pro-neoliberal at the national or federal scale. So it could not be used to challenge the hegemony of the neoliberal policies undertaken by the Indian government. Thus, clearly populist responses seem to remain bound by their particularities. Zizek's dismissal of populist movements is too hasty. Drawing attention to exploits of large capitalists and mobilizing a section of the transnational civil society is also important in achieving benefits from the state. Populism's role in breaking the silence cannot be denied. Yet breaking the silence does not mean new kinds of silences are not being produced. For example anthropologist John Gledhill (1998: 214) asks: "How do we balance the interests of an indigenous group in Amazonia, (which gets much more media attention) with those of poor people from other sectors of national society who have migrated into region in search of livelihood?" Similarly in the context of Singur, we may ask: How do we balance the interests of the small landholders in holding on to their land with theirs and others desire for non-farm employment and interests of the landless who desperately search for non-farm work?

Providing an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this dissertation but we may consider anthropologist John Gledhill's (1998) suggestion---that today we must focus less on silence than on the greater dilemmas of speaking---seems to be very sound.

Dilemmas of speaking should be addressed by acknowledging multiple voices within a particular site, acknowledging contradictions within the protesting individuals and formulating a language and vocabulary that goes beyond simplistic representations of complex realities. Dilemmas of speaking should also be addressed by recognizing both "agency of power" and "agency of project." As I have shown in the chapter "Meanings of Protest", desires for non-farm employment and better price for their plots of many villagers did not surface in the public face of the protest because the only way the villagers could communicate their attachment to land to a wider audience comprising of the urban activists and intellectuals was through the discourse of the "peasant" and the "rural" in the absence of any other trope that would express the complexity of their attachment to land.

Consequently, ethnographic engagements with social movements and ethical and representational issues that anthropologists encounter can make important contributions to the understanding of the most intractable problem of our time. Ethnographic engagements with social movements point towards several difficulties and shortcomings of movements. Thus, Anthony Bebbington (2006:15) writes, "Writing on social movements is often normative, with a related

tendency to celebrate the potential of movements to transform society.” Bebbington finds that movements become captured by or at the very least give most voice to some interests more than others. Similarly, in Wendy Wolford's (2004) analysis of the movement among the landless in Brazil, she suggests that the movement could not comprehend the unevenness of opinions among the villagers whom it sought to represent. Thus, stereotypes and authentic voices of “the peasant” that Post-developmentalists activists construct usually try to solve the problem of unevenness by hiding it and by not recognizing it, rather than confronting it. The ethnography has shown that has also been done in the case of Singur.

There has been a certain resistance among Left intellectuals to accepting the fact that the Indian village is undergoing major changes, not just economically, but culturally as well. Reluctance in coming to terms with this reality arises largely from the widely prevalent belief among intellectuals that the Indian village is timeless and unchanging and that the Indian villager likes nothing more than living in a rural setting. However, this is not just a belief but the outcome of the need to polarize opinions to create opposition to “development” and aim for a utopian future. I have showed in the chapter on the urban activists that such polarization creates dilemmas of speaking by not acknowledging multiple and contradictory voices within a particular site. The chapter titled “Meanings of Protest” has also argued that desires for non-farm employment and better price for their plots of many villagers did not surface in

the public face of the protest because the only way the villagers could communicate their attachment to land to a wider audience comprising of the urban activists and intellectuals was through the discourse of the “peasant” and the “rural” in the absence of any other trope that would express the complexity of their attachment to land. The result had been an impasse between the Left activists and Trinamul Congress who opposed the project and the ruling Marxist regime, which saw the Nano project as key to industrialization of West Bengal.

It is not the task of an anthropologist to propose what an alternative trope will be to represent the complexity and contradiction among the villagers. But notions about “the peasant” and tropes and strategies used to represent them need to be revised, not just for the sake of factual accuracy, but also because of the imperatives of the planning and developmental process. If the village is really the mainstay of India’s economy, then that would require a certain set of policy prescriptions based on expanding agriculture. But if, on the other hand, the agrarian character of the village is fast changing then that should certainly inspire a significant shift in perspective, especially when thinking in developmental terms. It is not as if these changes have not been noticed by scholars in India. For example, Dipankar Gupta (2006: 1354), an eminent Indian sociologist, notes that “while there is the acknowledgement that rural India is changing in factual terms, yet at the conceptual level the village and the villagers remain resolutely in the past. This is probably because of the hangover of earlier scholarship, as well as popular conceptions regarding India, that depict Indian

society to be essentially rural. So the theoretical cum analytical frameworks remain largely unchanged, while at the level of facts there is a clear recognition that things are not what they used to be." This dissertation is a contribution towards this much needed reconceptualization of "the rural" in India and elsewhere in the South.

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