

Operation Barga and Agrarian Change in Hill Darjeeling

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Introduction :

Operation Barga (OB) stands for the process of recording or documentation of *bargadars* or sharecroppers in West Bengal. The recording of bargadars to save them from illegitimate evictions by the landowners was considered necessary soon after Independence. However, the first ever attempt to provide security to them was found in the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 Section 50 (e). This Section of the Act made provisions for the recording of bargadars' names in the village record-of-rights. This work started in 1974, during the Congress rule in West Bengal but no satisfactory progress was made. The most difficult problem was the identification of bargadars and incidentally the above Section of the Act was not very clear about their definition. Thus, Section 21 B was inserted in this Act in 1977, which defined a bargadar as :

A person lawfully cultivating any land belonging to another person shall be presumed to be a bargadar in respect of such land if such person is not a member of the family of the other person whose land he cultivates and the burden of proving that such person is not a bargadar or that the land is in his (landowner's) personal cultivation shall lie on the landowner¹.

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In July, 1978 the Left Front Government put a special emphasis on this matter by implementing the OB.

The recording of bargadars before 1978 received a set-back due to the stiff resistance offered by landlords on whose behalf the Courts issued injunctions staying thereby the progress of the OB. The Left Front Government came in power in June 1977 and could mobilize sufficient public opinion to its side and by December, 1980 it could, with the help of the party workers and government officials, register as many as 10,01,926 bargadars constituting 2.3 percent of the State's total population. The magnitude of recorded bargadars is attempted to bring out in the following table.

Table—1
Magnitude of recorded bargadars in the districts of West Bengal

State/District	Total population	No. of bargadars recorded upto Dec. 31, 1980	% of recorded bargadars against State/ District pop.
West Bengal	44,312,011	10,01,926	2.3
24 Parganas	8,449,482	1,31,042	1.6
Howrah	2,417,286	30,743	1.3
Nadia	2,230,270	38,691	1.7
Murshidabad	2,940,204	48,248	1.6
Burdwan	3,916,174	79,835	2.0
Birbhum	1,775,909	60,449	3.4
Bankura	2,031,039	77,599	3.8
Minapore	5,509,247	2,13,698	3.9
Hoogly	2,872,116	66,329	2.3
Malda	1,612,657	60,325	3.7
West Dinajpur	1,859,887	84,955	4.6
Cooch Behar	1,414,183	54,797	3.9
Jalpaiguri	1,750,159	45,405	2.6
Darjeeling	781,777	9,820	1.3

Source : Figures on recorded bargadars from N. Bandyopadhyaya, "Operation Barga" and Land Reforms Perspective in West Bengal : A Discursive Review', *EPW*, June 20-27, 1981 : A—39, and on population from *Census of India 1971*, Series 22, West Bengal, Paper II A, General Population Tables, pp. 11-12.

The above table brings out some interesting profiles. It is seen, for example, that the percentage of recorded bargadars is lower than the State average in Darjeeling and the districts of southern Bengal. On the other hand, all the other districts of north Bengal and south-western Bengal, except Burdwan (which has 2.0 percent) and Hoogly (2.3 percent), have, compared to the State average again, a higher percentage of recorded bargadars against the district population. The higher percentage in these districts could be due to (i) a greater number of bargadars and/or (ii) more successful Operation Barga. It may also be noted that, with the exception of Howrah, Darjeeling has the lowest percentage (1.3) of recorded bargadars against the district population. While the reasons for this in Howrah is beyond the scope of discussion here, the same about Darjeeling are, amongst others, the following :

1. Out of 767.7 thousand acres of land in Darjeeling the net area sown 1967-68 was only 238.9 thousand acres or 31.1 percent and the area sown more than once was 28.9 thousand acres or 3.8 percent only². If data could be available at the subdivision level also it would perhaps be seen that both the net area sown and the area sown more than once would have a lower percentage in the hill areas because of the reasons given in the following.
2. Three of its four subdivisions—Sadar, Kurseong and Kalimpong have a different ecological set-up from the rest of West Bengal or even its tarai subdivision, Siliguri. There is usually no irrigated land above 4,000 feet above sea level and virtually no sharecroppers exist around and above 7,000 feet from sea level. They are generally found below 4,000 feet and in areas irrigated and/facing east or west ;the dry lands and the areas facing north and south are less productive and have less of *bargadars* even in the low altitudes.
3. The social, cultural political and historical background of this district is also, by and large, different from the rest of West Bengal. Though this background does not always have a correlation with the extent of *bargadars* there, it has a significant role to play in the partial success of the *Operation Barga* in this district. No quantitative data at the district level can be furnished here, as the Census does not have them (on sharecroppers), to show this but my own field observation confirms the above statement.

Quite a few articles by authors like Nripen Bandyopadhyaya, Ratan Khasnabis, Ratan Ghosh, Kalyan Dutt, Ashok Rudra, Sunil Sengupta, Buddhadeb Bose and Hillol Chakravorty, appeared recently³ on various aspects of the OB. Two major limitations may be pointed out in their writings :

1. None of the authors except Ratan Khasnabis and Ratan Ghosh seems to have based their statements on data collected from fieldwork. As a result of this overdependence on secondary data, the nuances and modalities of the actual implementation of the OB have not been asserted.
2. Some of the authors like Nripen Bandyopadhyaya and Buddhadeb Bose have made scanty references to Darjeeling district also but they have not brought out the specificities of its hill areas.

The hill areas of Darjeeling are unlike other districts of West Bengal in very many respects. And unless the peculiar historical and ecological factors of this region are taken into account, the generalizations based on the State level, with the aid of secondary data, may not be of much use. The paper is, therefore, an attempt to bring out the specificities of this region due to its different ecological, social, economic and political conditions from the rest of West Bengal. It also seeks to explain the low percentage of recorded *bargadars* in this district. For all this, a brief history of the region may be given first.

Darjeeling in the past :

The whole of the present Darjeeling district once belonged to Sikkim. The four subdivisions of it were gradually incorporated into the district by the British India. Most of the present Sadar and Kurseong subdivisions (then comprising 138 square miles) was granted to the East India Company by the Raja of Sikkim in 1835. Siliguri was annexed in 1850 as a kind of punishment to Sikkim for the ill-treatments which Captain Lloyd and Joseph Hooker had to bear in that country. And Kalimpong which was wrested away by Bhutan in 1706 was annexed after the Indo-Bhutan War of 1865⁴.

The population of the hill tract with 138 square miles in 1835 was about 100 and almost the whole area was covered with forest. Kalimpong and Siliguri, which joined later had relatively more population. An all-round change in Darjeeling began in 1866 since when tea and agriculture were extensively introduced and roads and bungalows were constructed all over the region. However, at the initial stage, the rapidly growing tea industry absorbed the major influx of the people from outside ; those who could not be absorbed there alone went for agricultural cultivation. Land though covered with forest was plenty and anybody could become a landowner by clearing a patch of forest and paying a certain amount of revenue or *khajana* to the *mandals* or headmen. There was one agrarian class unlike a few at present : they could be called tenant cultivators. Agrarian hierarchy in true sense had not developed though there were *mandals* and *karbaris* (account assistants of the *mandals*) above the common masses. Moreover, the agrarian relations were overshadowed by the relationships of caste, tribe, religion or place of migration.

In Bengal, the Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793 and it may be remembered here that by 1830's, the problem of the impoverished peasantry of Bengal had assumed so dangerous proportions that even a social reformer like Raja Rammohun Roy had pleaded for their cause. On the other hand, Darjeeling was outside West Bengal and with very sparse population till almost the mid-nineteenth century. It was also declared a Non-Regulation District till March 1937 which meant that the Acts and Regulations of the State Government were not implemented there unless specially extended.

Though no documentary proof can be advanced in support, it is quite safe to remark that *bargadari* system in Darjeeling hills is a twentieth century phenomenon. The first Settlement Report of 1892 on Kalimpong does not mention anything about sharecroppers ; it only notes, amongst others, that Kalimpong had 3717 raiyats and the average size of land-holding per raiyat was 9.7 acres and the rent, Rs. 6-8 per year. It is also noted that there were 55 grazing grounds covering an area of 7,900 acres⁵. The establishment of a 'Development Area' in 1919 and a municipal area in 1945 reduced the acreage in Kalimpong drastically, throwing not a few of them to the category of sharecroppers. More people who were thrown out from the tea gardens of Sadar and Kurseong subdivisions (especially after they began to fall sick) joined this category. Some of their partners came from Sikkim

also where a very crude form of feudalism with forced and free labour systems existed and many peasants found it worthwhile to leave the lands which they had made cultivable after years of hard work.

Another crisis which was gradually flourishing in Darjeeling was the gradual swelling up of the category of agricultural labourers. Though, a category of purely agricultural labourers cannot exist, as it may elsewhere, in the hill areas of Darjeeling due to insufficient irrigated lands, single cropping, low sustenance power of the land, etc, the Census began to record their growing presence. The category of agricultural labourers was not noticed at all till 1940s. The Census of India 1971 recorded the percentage of this category as 9.3 and the Census of 1981 noted it as 8.8 percent. But since the Census operations are based on 'individuals' rather than 'households' or 'family' these figures do not help much in gauging the magnitude of the agrarian crisis in Darjeeling hills. And, in my own experience, the category of 'agricultural labourers' locally called *khetalas* is more a 'functional category' than an agrarian category as such.

Operation Barga and agrarian change :

The impact of the OB on the agrarian society is really difficult to show, quantitatively and even qualitatively, at this stage. Since the Census does not bring out figures on the periodical increase or decrease in the number of sharecroppers, it is clear that its impact will remain unknown, at least quantitatively and at the district or State level, even in future. Figures on the agricultural labourers are available but the fluctuation or increase in their number cannot be justly related to the OB : it may be due to a host of other factors like lack of other employment opportunities, demographic and ecological changes⁶.

The definition of a *bargadar* as per the 1977 Amendment of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 may also be recapitulated here. The word *bargadar* is not used in the Darjeeling hills. The local word widely prevalent there and pretty close to the term *bargadar* is *pakhurey*. But a *pakhurey* means a landless tenant : he may be a sharecropper or an agricultural labourer. A *bargadar* or a sharecropper, on the other hand, may be a landowner or a landless. The question of registration does not carry much sense in the context of the landowning sharecroppers ; those who really need the security of tenure and are therefore registered or supposed to be registered are the *pakhureys* referring to the landless sharecropper or agricultural labourer.

It is also seen that the landowner has the upper hand in deciding who is his *pakhurey* if in case he is compelled to identify one. The question of 'lawfully cultivating any land belonging to another person' is again rather meaningless because sharecropping or leasing of lands is never based on written records. Even otherwise, 'insecurity of the landless' is only one of the many agrarian maladies, an important one though.

Nonetheless, some changes are occurring in the rural areas of the hill Darjeeling today. All these changes are not necessarily due to the OB as said earlier but some of them are certainly due to it. Some of these changes may be discussed here.

Among the recent changes in the Darjeeling hills, the stoppage of leasing out seems to be the most striking. Leasing out became rather intermittent after 1960 but it virtually stopped after 1978 though the replacement of *bargadars* is still occurring in some villages. As a consequent event, self-cultivation with or without hired labourers has become the rule of the day. Theoretically, this is expected to increase the wage level because the landowners need labourers to cultivate the land in lieu of the sharecroppers as before. But in practice, this has not happened and rather the use of family labour has become more common. In some cases, the lands withdrawn from the sharecroppers are even left fallow.

Another change is the growing complicity of the concept of *ownership* after the implementation of the OB. The landowners today cannot sell or lease out their lands under cultivation by registered *bargadars* without the consent of the latter. The sharecroppers in such situations appear as *de facto* landowners. It is so found despite a few cases where the weak sharecroppers have succumbed to the pressures of landowners to leave the latter's land. Incidentally, the OB has affected more minds than people as the registration of *bargadars* was few and far between.

It may also be added that the landowner-sharecropper relationship has become less cordial than before. This has an added implication in hill Darjeeling. In most such cases, the landowning class is represented by the Lepchas (and in some cases, Bhutias) and the *bargadars*' class is overwhelmed by the Nepalis though there are many Nepali landowners also. When the landowners and the sharecroppers belong to the same community, it often cuts across caste, lineage and religion. But due to the recent land reforms measures, especially the OB, a tension has crept not only between or among communities but also within a community, caste or lineage. Thus, a change in land relations has also affected the social, cultural and religious relationships.

The observation of Khasnabis in West Bengal in general that 'the traditional arrangement of 50:50 division of produce with no participation in the cost by the lessor seems to show a declining trend'⁷ is also not true of the Darjeeling hills. The division of produce there is still very much on 50:50 basis though the seed required for the next season is separated before the division takes place. But this is no new a phenomenon. The sharecroppers still bear all other costs of production though in some tenancies where the lessor and the lessees belong to the same kinship or caste, only the major harvests are divided and other subsidiary crops are given away to the sharecroppers.

In this context, it is quite surprising to note the statement of Buddhadeb Bose that the

wage of the agricultural labourers in Darjeeling has increased from Rs. 5.90 per day in 1976-77 to Rs. 7.25 per day in 1979-80⁸. This is hypothetically possible due to its geographical and ecological conditions which make it difficult, if not outright impossible, for the landowners to import labourers from outside the village or subdivision. But my survey in the hill areas of Darjeeling during 1981-82 shows that the wages per day are Rs. 2-3 for females and Rs. 4-5 for males. However, the labourers employed for certain special works like ploughing and construction or non-agricultural works within and outside the village are paid much higher, even upto Rs. 20 per day if they are skilled workers like masons or carpenters,

On the whole, it is observed that the landowners have developed a sore feeling towards the Left Front Government in West Bengal and their inclination to the Congress (I) and Gorkha League (a regional political party) is being heavier. The sharecroppers, on the other hand, are found caught in a dilemma—the landowners' political affiliation being not outright discardable for a deep feeling of tenurial insecurity prevails in the hills and gorges of Darjeeling.

Finally, a word about the spatial disparity in the impact of the OB in the region under discussion. Its impact is found more in the lower altitude villages than in the higher altitude ones where sharecropping is very shallow or nil. In the low altitude villages again, the impact is more in the Communist Party of India (marxist) dominated villages or areas where the CADP (Comprehensive Area Development Project, established in 1974) is functioning than in regions where the Congress (I) or Gorkha League has a stronghold. This is probably because of the fact that the CPI (M) supporters and the CADP officials actively participated in the implementation of the OB while the Congress (I) and Gorkha League supporters were reluctant, if not totally against its implementation.

Conclusion :

It is difficult to say if the changes discussed above are desirable even in a general context and an old debate on this question is still on. It is always a proper thing to find, in the first place, if the recording of *bargadars* in a particular region is really necessary and to what extent may the recording help them. A fair idea of the agrarian relations with all its local variations is imperative before implementing a programme like the OB. It was perhaps a mistake on the part of the ambitious Left Front Government to hurry with some preconceived ideas about *bargadars'* insecure position in all districts of West Bengal.

It is due perhaps to a lack of these considerations that the OB became only a partial success in the Darjeeling hills. In fact, it lost almost all valour after 1980 and hardly any new registration of the *bargadars* took place after that. Even if it were a cent percent success it is still doubtful if any development could take place in this region. Security to

sharecroppers is important wherever they are but whether they really need it in the projected manner is difficult to say. The problem, especially in the Darjeeling hills, is not as much the *bargadars* system as it is probably so elsewhere in West Bengal. The main problems are rather : (i) to increase the agricultural production within the given land and other ecological constraints ; (ii) diversification of economy so that more people could be shifted from agricultural to non-agricultural occupations ; (iii) extension of the existing cultivable lands so that more land could be available for cultivation, etc. Thus, while the OB ma/ appear very promising in the plains of West Bengal it does not mean much to the society and economy of the hill areas of Darjeeling.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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