

## LAND REFORM CONTINUES IN WEST BENGAL

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*New data show that, even over the last three years, the extent of land acquired by the State Government for industrial and infrastructural purposes was a fraction of the agricultural land distributed under land reform.*

The primary point of distinction between Left-led and all other State Governments in India is that, on coming to power, every Left-led Government has confronted the agrarian question directly. Land reform has been integral to the policy of the Left in government from the outset.

The importance of agrarian issues in the programme of Left Governments is illustrated by the speed with which these Governments have turned their attention to land reform. The first Communist government in India, led by E. M. S. Namboodiripad, was sworn in on April 5, 1957; the Government's first Ordinance on land reform was promulgated on April 11, just six days after the Government was formed. In West Bengal, too, land reform has been and remains a foundational feature of the power of the Left, and was perhaps the earliest item on the administrative agenda of the Left Front.

New data presented by the Minister for Land Reforms in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly indicate how significant a contribution West Bengal has made to India's aggregate land reform effort.

Net area sown in West Bengal as a proportion of net area sown in India was, according to the Union Ministry of Agriculture, 3.9 per cent in 2003-04. At the same time, as Table 1 shows, the extent of agricultural land distributed under land reform in West Bengal as a proportion of land distributed in the country as a whole is 22.6 per cent. Of the total number of gainers from land distribution programmes in the country, *more than half* -- a full 54.5 per cent -- are from West Bengal.

Table 1 *Agricultural land distributed under land reform and land reform beneficiaries, India and West Bengal*

	India	West Bengal	(3) as per cent of (2)
1	2	3	4
Area distributed under land reform (in acres)	4964995	1122116	22.6
Number of beneficiaries	5457522	2971857	54.5

*Source:* Budget Statement, Demand No. 36 for the year 2008-09, Land and Land Reforms Department, Government of West Bengal

*Note:* All-India figures are as in September 2007; West Bengal as on February 15, 2008

The absolute numbers give us an idea of the sweep of land reform. As a rough measure, the aggregate, as on February 15, 2008, of the total number of recipients of agricultural land under land reform (2,971,857), the number of recorded bargadars (1,510,657) and the number of recipients of homestead land (557,151), is 5,039,665 beneficiaries. (As an indicator of the obstacles to land reform, it is worth noting that 179,878 acres cannot be distributed because they are under legal injunction.)

The current data (that is, as on March 15, 2008) show that, among the recipients of agricultural land under land reform, the proportion of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe recipients (55 per cent) was significantly higher than the proportion of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in West Bengal's population (which was 28.1 per cent).

Another interesting feature of the data is that, as on February 15, 2008, the number of new joint *pattadars* (that is, persons who had received new joint title deeds to agricultural land under land reform) was 581,000, and the number of new women *pattadars* was 159,400. Assuming that half the new joint patta holders were women, a total of 449,900, or about 4 lakh and a half, women received title deeds to agricultural land under land reform. I have no comparative data for other States on this matter, but the number indicates a noteworthy response to a long-standing demand of the women's movement (although it still falls far short of creating conditions of equality in this regard).

*A myth of "reversal"*

Despite this achievement, there has been recent criticism, particularly since late 2006, that the Left Front government, in pursuit of its policy of industrialisation and industrial modernisation, has actually reversed its land reform programme. On the face of it, this allegation seems somewhat implausible: what could be the motive for a Government to be so obviously self-destructive (or, in Jyoti Basu's blunt formulation, "We are not out of our mind that we would destroy our agriculture...")?

Current data show the allegation also to be untrue.

Table 2 shows that, in each of the last three years, the extent of land acquired by the State Government for industrial and infrastructural purposes was a fraction of the agricultural land distributed under land reform (and this does not even include the extent of homestead land distributed). Even in 2006-07, when acquisitions peaked, the extent acquired was 4135 acres, and the extent distributed under land reform was 10,848 acres; in other words, in that year, *the extent of agricultural land distributed under the land reform programme was no less than 2.62 times the extent acquired for industry and infrastructure.*

Although it is true that more land was distributed in the first two decades of Left Front rule than at present, the fact remains that even today, with a narrower base of land available for redistribution, the extent distributed is much greater than the extent acquired.

Table 2 <i>Agricultural land acquired for industry and infrastructure and land distributed under land reform by the Government of West Bengal, 2005-06 to 2007-08 in acres</i>		
Year	Extent of agricultural land	
	acquired	distributed
2005-06	2322	8136
2006-07	4135	10848
2007-08	3750	10953
<i>Source:</i> Land and Land Reforms Department, Government of West Bengal		
<i>Note:</i> Figures rounded off to the nearest acre		

The freedom of the Government to implement land reform in West Bengal has been hemmed in historically by the constraints imposed by the Constitution and obstructed by counter-land-reform action and endless litigation. Nevertheless, the data show unequivocally not only that land reform swept the countryside in the late 1970s and 1980s, but also that the process of land distribution continues in rural West Bengal today.