Exploring Bengal Villages from Conflict Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Since it first came to power in West Bengal in 1977, the Left Front government attempted to improve the lot of rural poor by amending and implementing existing laws and making fresh legislations relating to land tenure and labour employment system, and ensuring the representation and participation of the marginalised communities in a rejuvenated local government or the Panchayat. The actions on the part of the government thus challenged the fundamental economic, political, and social structures on which the traditional village society was based. Indeed, the direct involvement of the political parties for the first time in the Panchayat elections of 1978 brought about a radical shift in the power politics at the village level. Thus many of the villages in West Bengal went through conflicts of varying intensities in the last quarter of 20th century. And there is no denying that all the noted factors as an external force has brought the underlying conflict of the traditional structure of relationships in the villages to the surface. In addition to these observations, the paper also attempts to offer a theoretical framework through which the problem under consideration could be conceptualized and addressed.

INTRODUCTION

The inequalities in the caste and agrarian structures and the land reform measures implemented by the Left Front government can be viewed respectively as internal and external sources of conflict in West Bengal villages. The unequal relationships between the landowning and landless castes have always been a latent source of conflict. The total dominance of the landowning castes and the powerlessness of the landless kept this underlying conflict from manifesting itself in the form of overt confrontation. It is argued in this paper that the exogenous factors such as the coming of Left Front Government under the dominant leadership of Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM as it is generally abbreviated, in 1977, commitment of the

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government to land reform and the ideology of equality and exposure of the members of the landless castes to the political and ideological influences emanating from outside the village acted as catalysts to bring the underlying tensions and conflicts in rural Bengal.

The findings on which this paper is based were collected from three villages of the Arambagh subdivision of the Hooghly district of West Bengal (for further detail see Dasgupta *et al*., 2000). Most of the villages of Arambagh region went through series of conflicts of varying intensities in the late 1970s and afterwards. The villages under study also experienced similar conflicts. Those conflicts had significant consequences in all areas of village life: economic, political, social and ceremonial.

The villages were chosen purposively because of the varying forms of manifestations of their conflicts. Indeed, it can be argued that the village

social system in all three instances has become transformed from its traditional form. However, most of the observations made in this study can be generalized in broad terms for the villages far beyond the boundaries of the immediate area within which the three villages of the present study are located.

VILLAGE IN CONSENSUS PERSPECTIVE

The traditional anthropological view of the village society in India is based on the consensus perspective. It has been conceptualized predominantly as a *social system* which, according to Srinivas (1955: 35), "commands loyalty from all who live in it, irrespective of caste affiliation." In describing the "social system" of a village in Mysore, Srinivas noted that even though affiliation of villagers to different castes may appear to be a divisive feature in that each caste practices endogamy, follows an occupation of its own, has its own distinctive cultural traditions, a council to deal with its internal matters, and strictly follows rules limiting its commensal relationships with other castes, the village is also characterized by structural features to counteract the divisive tendencies of its castes. Indeed, occupational specialization of castes forces them to be economically interdependent as members of the village and "gives each group a vested interest in the system as a whole" (*ibid.*, 34). There are a variety of other "vertical institutions" which bring together the villagers belonging to different castes such as the dyadic relationships between landowner and tenant, master and servant, and even between creditor and debtor all of which take place among villagers across caste lines. Finally, the "dominant caste," the members of which are economically, politically, and sometimes numerically preponderant in the village, play the most important role in maintaining the solidarity of social and ethical code of the entire village: "They represent the vertical unity of the village against the separatism of caste" (*ibid.*, 34).

Beteille (1980: 110) summarizes the consensus view of the village social structure in terms of three interrelated features: a multiple gradation based on an elaborate division of labour, innumerable vertical ties of a "diffuse and enduring nature" between individuals and families; and a general acceptance among the villagers of the "hierarchical values"

associated with the multiple gradation.

The multiple gradation, according to Beteille, was most clearly evident in the hierarchical arrangement of castes. It had traditionally provided the basis in terms of which the social and economic life of the village was organized. The agricultural castes primarily engaged themselves in cultivating activities and non-agricultural castes specialized themselves in a variety of crafts and services working as carpenters, potters, barbers, sweepers, leather workers and so on. In the past a village attempted to attain a degree of self-sufficiency in agriculture and in crafts and services by attracting different peoples of different castes specialized in these activities although no village ever attained complete self-sufficiency.

The "rights over land and its produce and obligations of service" (*ibid.*, 111) were also largely determined by the caste gradation. There was, for example, an inverse relationship the amount of manual work performed and the degree of control over land. Members of higher castes who generally owned and controlled the land abstained from all manual work as required by custom while those of lower castes owned a little or no land at all and performed mostly the manual work. The multiple gradation in the village was thus based on a combination of economic and status inequalities which found its concrete manifestation in the caste structure of the village. Beteille (1980, 113), however, emphasizes that the village with its many gradations in the past could not be viewed simply as a dichotomy between landowning and landless castes. Although there has always been a conflict of interest among people occupying unequal positions, the "polarization of these conflicts giving rise to class like phenomenon is of recent origin."

A major structural feature, according to both Srinivas (1955) and Beteille (1980), which kept the village community from being polarized into two mutually opposed classes, was the many vertical ties which existed between individuals and families. The *jajmani* relationships between families of different castes, for example, was a major structural principle in terms of which families of higher castes maintained close economic and social relationships with those of lower. These relationships defined the gradations in control over land and in types of work on a scale of purity and pollution. Families controlling land enjoyed

a superior status in the system in relation to those who provided with labour crafts, and services for a share of the harvest determined by custom.

Beteille (1980: 115) maintains that although in the contemporary perspective such relations might be considered exploitative, they were generally accepted as the "natural scheme of things" in the past: "Not only were different people unequally placed, but each knew where he belonged, and was in a large measure reconciled to his place in the total scheme of things." This general acceptance of hierarchical values, Beteille argues, contributed to the stability of a design that was distinctive of the village as a social system. He, however, adds that these hierarchical values, although generally accepted, were not necessarily held with the same intensity by villagers at the different levels of hierarchy. Beteille further suggests that the hierarchical values were perhaps actively espoused by the villagers who were at the top of the hierarchy whereas those at the bottom were reconciled to them.

Whether or not the traditional village society can indeed be conceptualized as what Beteille (1974: 194-200) elsewhere called a "harmonic system" based on a general acceptance of the hierarchical structure and associated values is an interesting question. It seems rather contradictory to claim a social structure based on unequal, to some even exploitive, relationships to have been "generally" accepted as a "natural scheme of things" when it was actively espoused by only those who belonged to the top of the hierarchy and had the most to gain from such a system of relationships and those at the bottom were merely reconciled to it. It can be argued, on the other hand, that the unequal and exploitative relationships which characterized the traditional village society has always been an internal source of conflict even though it rarely manifested itself in an overt fashion and did not become intense and violent until recent times.

Although there have been several studies of factional conflict at the village level (Lewis, 1958: 114-154; Majumdar, 1958: 114-123; Bailey, 1957: 194-195; Nicholas, 1965; 1966), factions have been mostly analyzed in terms of their negative consequences for the otherwise well-integrated village social system. It is not surprising then that the contemporary manifestations of overt conflicts will be characterized by the consensualists as a "recent phenomenon"

caused primarily by the "external" forces bringing "disharmony" in the village social system (Beteille, 1974). Although external forces indeed made significant contributions to contemporary conflicts at the village level in West Bengal, it can be argued that potentials for such conflicts always existed in the institutionalized structure of the village. Such a potential was most pronounced in the agrarian structure of the village dominated by the landowning higher castes (Mukhopadhyay, 1982).

VILLAGE IN CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

The social system or the consensus perspective, as noted earlier, views the Indian village as a persisting and well-integrated configuration of elements based on a general consensus of its members. According to this view, the structural inequalities which characterize the relationships in the village are accepted by all members including those who belong to low castes and generally landless as the "natural scheme of things." Dahrendorf (1973: 102), a noted conflict theorist, maintains that no theory of conflict and social change can forego the description of the structural entity or social system within which conflict and change occur, and the consensus theory, or the "integration theory" as Dahrendorf refers to it, provides such a description. Indeed the anthropological literature on India has a rich tradition of the so-called "village studies" providing excellent descriptions and analyses of the village social system as an integrated entity. However, the problem with the consensus theory is, according to Dahrendorf, that it puts much emphasis on the functional contributions the elements of a social system make for its maintenance and preservation rather than the conflicts they could generate leading to its structural transformation. Conflicts generated by the structural elements of a social system are often termed by integrationists as "dysfunctions" and treated as a residual category. Dahrendorf argues that a careful analysis of the problems which consensualists label as dysfunctional elements could be a useful starting point for a meaningful theory of conflict and social change. In Dahrendorf's view, the consensus perspective, although highly useful for a holistic description of the integrated social system, cannot effectively explain the phenomena of social conflict

and change.

Dahrendorf (1959; 1973) himself proposed an alternative theory of society — which he called the "coercion theory" as opposed to the "integration theory" (1959: 162) — and claimed it to be more appropriate for the study of social conflict and change. The basic postulates of Dahrendorf's version of conflict or coercion theory are diametrically opposite to those of the consensus or integration theory. The postulates of the consensus theory (*ibid.*,161) are that a society is based on a consensus of values among its members and that it is a relatively persistent, stable, a well-integrated structure of elements with every element making a functional contribution to its maintenance as a system. The postulates of Dahrendorf's theory (*ibid.*,162), on the other hand, are that a society is based on the coercion of some of its members by others displaying constant dissension and conflict and each of its elements makes a contribution to its disintegration thus subjecting the society to a constant process of change.

Dahrendorf (1973: 103-104) emphasizes that both models of society are in a certain sense valid and analytically useful. Stability and change, integration and conflict, function and dysfunction, and consensus and coercion are equally valid aspects of every society. Indeed, while the consensus theory is useful in studying the society as an integrated entity, the conflict theory is obviously more appropriate for the study of its change. From the conflict perspective, one may raise the following questions: How does a society's structure give rise to groups which are in conflict? What forms do the conflicts among such groups assume? How do the conflicts affect the society's structure? Dahrendorf's (1973: 107) conflict perspective thus involves an analysis of: (1) structural factors which give rise to conflicting groups in a social system; (2) internal and external factors affecting the form and intensity of conflict; and (3) the nature of structural change brought about by the conflict. He suggests four stages in the process of conflict and social change which can serve as a useful frame in exploring Bengal villages from conflict perspective.

Stage I: Quasigroups with Latent Interests

Dahrendorf (1973: 107) maintains that every *imperatively coordinated group* is initially made up

of two *quasigroups* who are carriers of positive and negative dominance roles with opposite *latent interests*. He argues (Dahrendorf, 1959: 165) that "consistent with its basic postulates the integration theory defines the "social system" — its unit of social analysis — as essentially a voluntary association of people "who share certain values and set up institutions in order to ensure smooth functioning of cooperation." The conflict theory, on the other hand, emphasizes a different aspect of the same unit of study by defining it as an "imperatively coordinated group" where enforced constraint or coercion, rather than voluntary cooperation or general consensus, makes it to cohere. Thus in an imperatively coordinated group there is a differential distribution of power and authority where "some positions are entrusted with a right to exercise control over other positions in order to ensure effective coercion." The village, from the conflict perspective, thus can be viewed as an imperatively coordinated group rather than as an integrated social system based on shared values and general consensus. The Indian village has been traditionally characterized by a significant inequality in the distribution of authority and power and the landowning groups who hold the positions of authority and power control others to maintain their dominance (Dasgupta, 1988; 2001).

The landowning upper castes and landless lower castes in a village represent the two 'quasigroups' before the occurrence of overt conflicts. They are 'quasigroups' because at this stage they are mere aggregates sharing similar social and economic characteristics, not "organized units." The landowning upper castes as an aggregate hold the authority and power and thus carry the positive dominance roles. The landless low castes, on the other hand, carry the "negative dominance" roles as an aggregate in that they have little power and authority in the affairs of the village and are dominated by the members of the landowning castes.

The opposite interests of the two quasigroups are "latent" because their opposition of outlook is not conscious at this stage and exists only in the form of expectations with certain positions such as those between landowners and sharecroppers, employers and labourers, masters and servants, and patrons and clients. The interest of the landowning

upper castes who carry the positive dominance roles as a quasigroup is to maintain the *status quo*. The landless lower castes, on the other hand, represent, the quasigroup carrying the negative dominance roles with an interest in the change of the *status quo* although they are hardly conscious of such an interest at this stage.

Stage II: Organized Groups with Manifest Interests

In the second stage, according to Dahrendorf, the members of the opposing quasigroups bearing positive and negative dominance roles organize themselves into groups or organized entities with "manifest interests" expressed in "formulated programs and ideologies." The transition of the quasigroups into organized groups with manifest interests, however, are influenced by what Dahrendorf (1973: 108) refers to as the "conditions of organization." The conditions of organization are of three essential types: *(i) social conditions* which allow or impede the possibility of communication among the members of, and a certain method of recruitment into, the quasigroups; (ii) *political conditions* such as a "guarantee of freedom of coalition"; and (iii) *technical conditions* which include the material means, an ideology, and an effective leadership. The organization of conditions determine the extent to which quasigroups with latent interests are transformed into interest groups with manifest interests.

It is argued in this paper that all three types of what Dahrendorf refers to as "conditions of organizations" exist at present in West Bengal to facilitate the transformation of the quasigroups into organized groups with manifest interest. There have been significant changes in social and political conditions in recent decades in West Bengal which appeared to have influenced the polarization of interest in rural areas (Lieten, 1992). There has been a marked increase in the literacy and education among the rural people including those belonging to lower castes. The introduction of free school education at all levels has encouraged even the families of landless castes to send their children to schools. The number of college-educated or college-attending young men and women has increased significantly in rural West Bengal and although most of them belong to upper

and middle castes they are no longer a rarity among lower castes.

One of the most important developments to have occurred in the rural areas of West Bengal in recent decades is the improvements in communication and transportation. Because of their relatively cheap price and low cost of maintenance, transistor radio sets are owned by the majority of households in the village including those of landless castes. Increase in the number of all-weather roads and long distance bus routes have made travel within rural areas as well as to small and large towns and the city of Kolkata easier and cheaper. Rural residents travel more easily and frequently to neighboring towns and villages for shopping, trading, attending fairs and festivities, and visiting relatives and friends. Ownership and use of bicycles have become almost universal among villagers including the landless castes, and some families of the landowning castes even own motorized scooters for the purpose of transportation. The expansion of the social horizon due to improved transportation and communication and increased contact with urban centers have also led to the secularization of traditional values. Its impact is most evident on the practices and values associated with the caste hierarchy. There has been a perceptible softening of ritual restrictions on interdining and intermarriage between members belonging to castes of different ritual statuses. Interdining between caste of proximate status categories is quite common. Instances of intercaste marriage are not as rare as they used to be.

The rise in literacy and education, improvements in transportation and communication and increasing secularization of traditional rural values provided a significantly altered social context within which communication among the hitherto quasigroups has been greatly facilitated leading to their transformation, especially that of the landless low castes, to groups with manifest interest. It may be argued that until the Left Front government came into existence in 1977, it was the landowning castes, rather than the landless, which had both the political and technical means to be organized as an interest group. Although the Congress Party never explicitly proclaimed itself to be the party of landowners looking after their interest — and indeed many of the agrarian reform measures

being implemented by the Left Front government were legislated when the Congress Party was in power — it is widely perceived as such especially by the members of landless low castes because of its close association with landowners many of whom hold offices of the Congress Party at local levels. The close association of landowners with the party in power and the government bureaucracy not only allowed them to reap the benefits of various rural development programs financed by the Congress government but also maintain their dominance over the rural poor.

The coming of the Left Front government with the CPM as its dominant partner provided the rural poor with political and technical means to organize with manifest interest and ideology. The cause of the "agricultural proletariat" came to be championed by the parties of the Left Front, particularly the CPM. The peasant wing of the CPM as well those of the other leftist parties of the government worked vigorously among the rural poor to raise their political consciousness and mobilize them as an interest group challenging the dominance of landowners. Imbibed with an egalitarian ideology, assured of the organizational support of the leftist political parties, and backing of the government in power, landless low castes have now become an organized entity in many villages pursuing their manifest interests. Landowning groups, on the other hand, view the implementation of the agrarian reform measures of Left Front government as aimed at rousing the landless group against their legitimate economic and political authority in the village. Thus, the increased consciousness and organization of the two hitherto quasigroups has given rise to two clearly differentiated groups, landowners and landless, with opposite manifest interests.

Stage III: Conflict Between Interest Groups

Interest groups who come into existence become involved in constant conflict over the "preservation and change of the status quo" (Dahrendorf, 1973: 107). The form of the conflict and the degree of its intensity is determined by what Dahrendorf calls "the conditions of conflict." The relative rigidity or flexibility of the hierarchical structure in allowing the social mobility of individuals and families and the "presence of effective mechanisms, for regulating

social conflicts" within the social entity under study are two of the most important conditions for conflict. These two conditions, according to Dahrendorf, have considerable influence on the nature and intensity of conflict "ranging from democratic debate to civil war."

The conflict in West Bengal villages in the recent paste is viewed in this paper as a conflict between two interest groups: the landowning and the landless. The landowning groups, who traditionally dominated the economic, social, and political life of the village, obviously want to maintain the *status quo.* The goal of the landless group is not only to protect and promote their interests in the agrarian sphere but also uplift their social and political status in the village. The conflict between landowning upper castes and landless lower castes thus has not remained confined in the agrarian sphere although it is the principal arena of conflict. The lower caste groups are also trying to attain a participatory role in the political decision making process by gaining control of the statutory Panchayat, and are demanding the abolition of traditional inequality in social and ritual spheres. The landowning upper castes, on the other hand, are fighting to maintain political, social, and ritual dominance traditionally enjoyed by them.

It is hypothesized here that the nature and form of conflicts vary according to the structural potentials for overt conflict in the villages and the nature of political influences from the outside. Villages with extreme structural inequality between the landowning and landless groups are more susceptible to external ideological and normative influences than those which manifest a moderate inequality in their hierarchical features. In the villages where landowning groups hold large units and are primarily noncultivating owners, and a large landless group work on their land as sharecroppers and agricultural labourers under their total economic, social and political domination, the conflict will tend to take a rather intense form primarily because the landowning groups have both the economic and political means to meet the challenge to their traditional domination. On the other hand, in the villages where the members of the landowning group are owner cultivators operating primarily medium-sized units, the structural inequality between the landowning and landless groups is not great enough and the landowning group is not economically

and politically dominant enough to resist effectively the demands of the landless group backed by the political parties in power. In the instances where the peasant wings of several leftist parties compete with each other in mobilizing the landless group, the conflict tends to remain confined between the competing groups among the landless rather than between the landowning and landless groups. On the other hand, where the landless group can be mobilized into a unified entity the challenge against the dominance of the landowning group tends to be more effective.

Although the nature of the conflict between the two groups in West Bengal villages has been rather intense and sometimes has taken violent form, it has remained more or less confined to local skirmishes rather than a full-fledged civil war. The support of the political parties the then in power to the cause of the landless, the legal legitimation of the demands of the landless through legislation aimed at tenancy reforms and betterment of the wages and working conditions of agricultural labourers, and neutralization of law and order agencies, which generally supported the landowning groups in the past, has created a situation which presents only two options to landowners in most cases: (1) reluctantly accept the demands of the landless group, or (2) refuse to yield to the pressure and continue to fight even at the risk of considerable economic loss. It appears that the majority of the landowners have chosen to accept the first option, at least for the time being, realizing the futility of fighting against a group which is numerically large, indispensable for agricultural activities, and has the legal and political support of the government. Only a minority of relatively wealthy farmers, who have the economic means and political will, continued to resist the demand of the landless.

Stage IV: Conflict and Structural Change

Conflict among the opposing interest groups leads to the change in the structure of social relations as the dominance relations between the two groups undergo transformation. The kind, depth, and speed of this transformation, however, depend upon "the conditions of structural change" (Dahrendorf, 1973: 107). Dahrendorf posits an intimate connection between the intensity of conflict and the extent of structural change. Depending upon the condition and intensity of conflict, the structural change might take the form of reform *within* the existing system or a fundamental structural change *of* the social system. Since the change of the latter type may come about only through an intense conflict, such as that characterizes a revolution, such a change in West Bengal villages cannot be predicted given the present conditions of organization and conflict. However, the legislative measures reforming rights to land and land use are radical enough and the ensuing conflict between landowning and landless groups in many cases are intense enough to bring in significant changes in the structure of relationships in West Bengal villages.

CONCLUSIONS

Anthropologists have mostly viewed the traditional village social system in India from consensus perspective. They perceived it as a "harmonic system". In this conceptualization, the village social structure based on its unequal multiple gradations and associated relationships have been generally accepted something as a natural one. The consensus perspective has been generally criticized for focusing primarily on the forces contributing to the maintenance and continuity of the social system and ignoring or de-emphasizing those while making a negative contribution. The view of the Indian village as a well-integrated harmonic system similarly overlooks or de-emphasizes the structural sources of conflict.

The paper offers a theoretical framework in terms of which we can possibly analyzed the conflicts and examine their consequences on the structures of relationships in West Bengal villages. The broad analytical overview of the causes, nature, and potential structural consequences of the conflicts in West Bengal villages from the perspective of Dahrendorf's conceptualization of the stages of conflict provides both with the historical context and the theoretical frame in terms of which the specific conflicts in the case of study villages can also be analyzed and interpreted. Indeed, Dahrendorf's model for the study of conflict is a theoretical abstraction stated in general terms which is, as he himself puts it (1973:108), "hardly more than a tentative indication of the sorts of variables in question." Therefore there

is a scope to identify these "variables in question" in empirical terms through anthropological explorations.

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