RESEARCH ARTICLE

Land Tenures in Cooch Behar District, West Bengal: A Study of Kalmandasguri Village

Ranjini Basu*

Abstract: This paper describes and analyses changes in land tenure in Cooch Behar district, West Bengal. It does so by focussing on land holdings and tenures in one village, Kalmandasguri. The paper traces these changes from secondary historical material, oral accounts, and from village-level data gathered in Kalmandasguri in 2005 and 2010. Specifically, the paper studies the following four interrelated issues: (i) land tenure in the princely state of Cooch Behar; (ii) land tenure in pre-land-reform Kalmandasguri; (iii) the implementation and impact of land reform in Kalmandasguri; and (iv) the challenges ahead with respect to the land system in Kalmandasguri. The paper shows that an immediate, and dramatic, consequence of land reform was to establish a vastly more equitable landholding structure in Kalmandasguri.

Keywords: Kalmandasguri, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, sharecropping, princely states, history of land tenure, land reform, village studies, land rights, panel study.

Introduction

This paper describes and analyses changes in land tenure in Cooch Behar district, West Bengal.[1] It does so by focussing on land holdings and tenures in one village, Kalmandasguri.[2] The paper traces these changes by drawing from secondary historical material, oral accounts, and from village-level data gathered in Kalmandasguri in 2005 and 2010.

Peasant struggle against oppressive tenures has, of course, a long history in the areas that constitute the present state of West Bengal (Dasgupta 1984, Bakshi 2015).

* Research Scholar, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, ranjini.che@gmail.com

[1] Cooch Behar is spelt in various ways. The district administration spells it Cooch Behar, while the Census uses Koch Bihar. For the purpose of this paper I have used the spelling used by the district administration. In the princely state of Cooch Behar, too, there was confusion regarding the spelling of Cooch Behar. To maintain uniformity in official documents, Maharaja Nipendra Narayan in a notice issued on April 13th, 1896, and published in the Cooch Behar Gazette, sanctioned the usage of the spelling "Cooch Behar."

[2] Kalmandasguri is located in Cooch Behar II Block of the district. It is in the Bararangras Gram Panchayat.

The history of land reform, supported by the power of the State administration and seeking to bring land to the tiller, is more recent. Such land reform was initiated in the late 1960s, but really became the focal point of government activity in rural areas after 1977, when the first Left Front government was elected to power (Dasgupta 1984, Sengupta and Gazdar 2003).

The consequences and overall impact of land reform and of the subsequent introduction of the three-tier system of democratic local government on agrarian structure and agricultural growth in West Bengal are well documented (Sen 1992, Lieten 1992, Saha and Swaminathan 1994, Rawal 2001, Banerjee *et al.* 2002, Mishra 2007, Bakshi 2008, Ramachandran *et al.* 2010).

Land reform in West Bengal comprised tenancy reforms, redistribution of ceiling-surplus land, and, later, the distribution of homestead land. Land reform came to be implemented through progressive legislation and amendments to existing land reform laws by the Left governments in office (Dasgupta 1984, Bakshi 2015). The success of the West Bengal land reform programme was its two-pronged approach, that is, by means of political mobilisation of beneficiaries and through administrative measures. It was the participation of peasants' organisations, local body institutions, and groups of beneficiaries that helped in breaking the influence of feudal landed households and encouraged sharecroppers to register themselves as tenants during Operation Barga (Surjeet 1992, Bakshi 2015).

As a result of land reform there was a sharp increase in rural electrification and irrigation across the State. West Bengal saw the highest growth rates in agricultural production and productivity in India from the 1980s and until the early 1990s. There was also a substantial rise in rural wages. A measure of the success of land reform in West Bengal was the sheer extent of its impact: more than half of rural households were directly the beneficiaries of land reform after 1977 (Ramachandran and Ramakumar 2001).

Most of the accounts of the changes brought about by land reform in the State have been at a somewhat macro–level. This paper attempts to contribute to the history of modern land reform in West Bengal by using a multiplicity of sources and types of data — including oral histories, statistical data, original Bengali writing from the peasant unions, and historical work on Cooch Behar — to examine land tenures in a specific district and village.

Until 1948, Cooch Behar was a princely state, that is, while being subordinate to the colonial power, it was not directly governed as part of British India. It became a district of West Bengal in 1950.

As a princely state, there were aspects of land tenure in this State that rendered it distinct from other parts of West Bengal. In addition, the informational bases for the

understanding of the economies of princely states were, in general, weaker than the corresponding sources of information on British India (see Ramusack 2004).

Scholarship on the state of Kerala provides an interesting study in contrast in this regard. There have been serious attempts by historians and social scientists to understand the differences between the historical trajectories of development between Malabar, which was part of the Madras Presidency and British India, and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. These studies have examined differences with regard to land systems, education, and health, and the impact of these on economic growth and human development as a whole (Ramachandran 1997, Planning Commission of India 2008). In West Bengal, no similar comparative work has been done on Cooch Behar and the areas of Permanent Settlement in Bengal.[3]

This article deals with four interrelated issues:

1. land tenure in the princely state of Cooch Behar;
2. land tenure in pre land reform Kalmandasguri;
3. the implementation and impact of land reform in Kalmandasguri; and
4. the challenges ahead with respect to the land system in Kalmandasguri.

Data Sources

For aspects of land tenure in the erstwhile princely state of Cooch Behar, I have used, *inter alia,* administrative reports, settlement reports, the texts of relevant legislation, and certain documents of the Krishak Sabha (Peasant Union) and autobiographical accounts published originally in Bengali. The brief descriptive accounts of land relations in Kalmandasguri prior to land reform are from interviews conducted in the village.

Kalmandasguri was surveyed at different times by groups of scholars (these surveys are listed elsewhere in this article). I have used material from two surveys, conducted in 2005 and 2010, for this article. The survey of 2010 was part of the West Bengal Round of the Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI) conducted by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies.

Land Tenure in Princely Cooch Behar

This section deals with land relations in Cooch Behar at the time of its merger with the Indian Union in 1948. With the conclusion of the Treaty of 1773, Cooch Behar became a revenue-paying protected state under the British colonial rule. The British

[3] The Permanent Settlement as a revenue collection arrangement was implemented in the Bengal Presidency by the British rulers in 1873. The rent was fixed in perpetuity under this system. The Settlement created a class of statutory landlords or zamindars, a class whose rights were abolished only after Indian independence in 1947.

brought reforms to the land revenue systems after conducting multiple settlement surveys, such as had not been conducted before 1773 (Chaudhuri 1903, Ganguli 1930).

In one of the first studies of the character of "native states," R. P. Dutt (1940/1979) argued that the preservation of princely states was an instrument of British policy aimed at garnering support from the feudal bases that the princely state represented for the sustenance of its alien rule. He further remarked that these states represented "the most backward agrarian economy of a feudal type." "In only a few is there any industrial development," he wrote. "Slavery is rampant (*ibid.*, p. 446)."

On the eve of independence, Cooch Behar's land tenure system was characterised by extreme levels of subinfeudation and a highly differentiated peasantry, a complex admixture of pre-colonial feudatory traits and tenurial changes introduced by the British administration. Figure 1, which derives from Chaudhuri (1903), Ganguli (1930), and Todarmal (2002), illustrates the complex structure of land tenure in Cooch Behar at the time of independence. As the diagram shows, subinfeudation — or the number of layers between the actual cultivator and the titular owner of land — was greatest on temporarily settled revenue land.

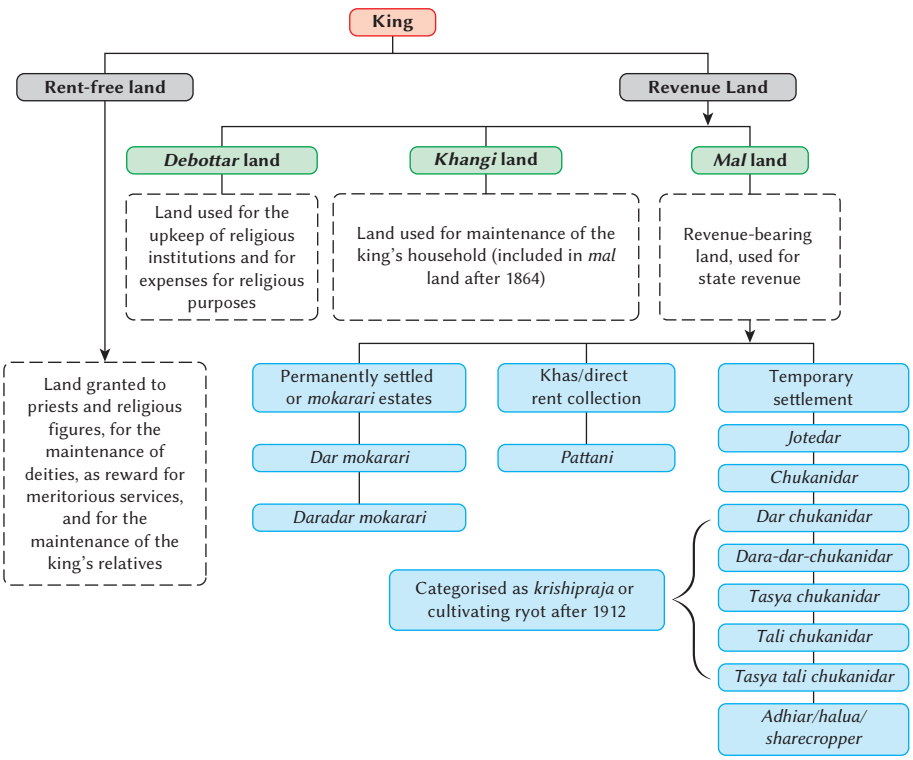

Figure 1 *Land tenurial structure of Cooch Behar at the time of merger with Indian Union*
Sources: Chaudhuri (1903), Ganguli (1930), Todarmal (2002).

Temporarily settled revenue land also constituted the largest share of all land in the State. According to data in Chaudhuri (1903), temporarily settled lands constituted 85 per cent of all land covered by the second settlement conducted in the princely state (*ibid*, p. 473). Given its share in land as a whole, temporarily settled revenue land was the major arena of land reform in the district in later times, and it is on this sector of land that we concentrate our attention in this section.

On temporarily settled revenue lands, the tier in the hierarchy after the king was the revenue-paying individual land holder or *jotedar*. The rights of *jotedars* over the land were hereditary, transferable, and divisible according to customary law of the State, on condition of regular payment of rent to the state (Bandhopadhyay 1884, Chaudhuri 1903).

The *jotedars* were followed by a series of sub-tenants lower in the tenurial hierarchy, of whom there were as many as six levels in the princely state of Cooch Behar. These were the *chukanidar*, followed by the *dar chukanidar*, *dara-dar chukanidar*, *tasya chukanidar*, *tali chukanidar*, and *tasya tali chukanidar*. The rights of the holders of under-tenures were transferable and inheritable, with the consent of the superior tenant (*op. cit.*).

There were several laws passed to control ever-increasing subinfeudation.[4] However, tenurial legislation failed to produce the desired effect and subinfeudation continued illegally (Ganguli 1930, Government of Bengal 1940). Legislation was reported to have created a large number of illegal tenants. These illegal tenants eventually constituted almost 90 per cent of the entire cultivating population (Ganguli 1930), and were recognised in the land tenure structure of Cooch Behar as *krishipraja* or cultivating *raiyats* and were recorded as being legal rent-payers during the resettlement surveys conducted between 1912 and 1927. By the end of 1927, such *krishipraja* numbered 49,025 (*op. cit.*).

At the time of the first settlement, the lowest rung in the land tenure structure of native Cooch Behar was formed by the sharecroppers (*adhiar* or *halua*). A sharecropper cultivated on a half share arrangement and was characterised by W. O. A. Beckett, Assistant Commissioner in charge of Cooch Behar Settlement, as "a hired labourer paid in kind" (Hunter 1876, p. 389). Most sharecroppers lived on the landlord's premises and were fed by the landlord during the farming season. They cultivated using the landlord's plough and cattle. The quantity of seed involved in cultivation was deducted from the sharecroppers' share of produce (Chaudhuri 1903). Sharecroppers did not hold any right over the land and were subject to frequent evictions. However, in 1872 a rule was made under which any sharecropper who

[4] Reference here is to the passing of the Sub Infeudation Act of 1888 and the Cooch Behar Tenancy Act of 1910. These laws made all tenancies below the level of the chukanidar and verbal transactions illegal (Chaudhuri 1903, Todarmal 2002).

cultivated land with his own cattle for 12 years continuously acquired occupancy rights over the land (Ganguli 1930).

This clause was, however, often breached, as there were instances of landlords exchanging money and favours in order to shift their sharecroppers from one plot to another, in order to evade the 12-year clause and as a safeguard against giving occupancy rights to their tenants.[5]

In a commentary on the condition of sharecroppers in Cooch Behar before land reform, Shiben Chaudhuri, a Krishak Sabha (Peasant Union) leader from Cooch Behar wrote

> Sharecropping was the primary form of cultivation, with a 50:50 crop sharing arrangement. However, in many cases the *adhiars* received less than 50 per cent. The living standard of the sharecroppers was very low. Most lived in straw houses, and on the land of the *jotedar*. They lived half naked, with the women only covering the parts from the breasts till the knees with a cloth called *patani*. Sharecroppers lived almost as slaves (Chaudhuri 1986).

By the end of the colonial rule, then, Cooch Behar had a land tenure structure at the apex of which was the king, followed by the revenue-paying landholders or *jotedars*. The *jotedars* were followed by a series of inferior sub-tenants, whose levels numbered up to six. At the bottom of this pyramid were the mass of sharecroppers who had no right over the land they cultivated, lived on the land of the landowner, and faced frequent evictions. Tenurial legislation was hardly able to check the rising subinfeudation, and, indeed, often added to the creation of a large population of illegal tenants (*krishipraja*). With backward agricultural practices (the plough being the only implement other than hand implements) and the near-complete absence of irrigation (Sircar 1990), production was low, thus making it very difficult for sharecroppers to pay high rents. This led to debt and mortgages among the peasantry.

Kalmandasguri: An Introduction

The case study of the implementation of land reform in this article was conducted, as mentioned earlier, in Kalmandasguri village. Kalmandasguri is a constituent village of the Bararangras Gram Panchayat in Cooch Behar II block, Cooch Behar district. It is 17 km from Cooch Behar town, the district headquarters. It is a backward village in terms of its connectivity to the nearest town and other economic centres. The nearest bus stop is in Pundibari, which is 7 km away (from Pundibari, there are cycle rickshaws, vans, and private vehicles to the village). Private vehicles make around five trips each day between Cooch Behar town and Baudiardanga, which

[5] Interview with Shakalu Barman, August 31, 2013.

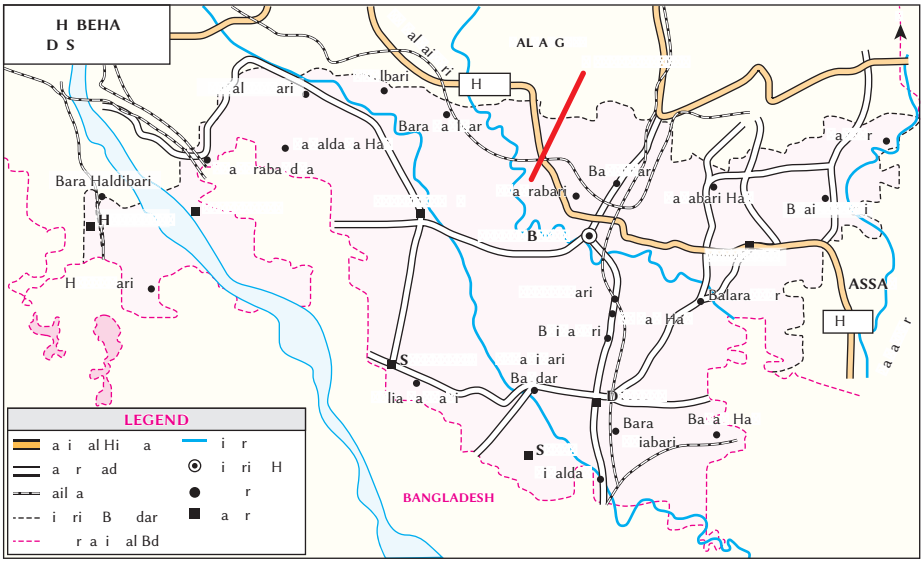

Figure 2 *Location of Kalmandasguri in Cooch Behar, West Bengal*
Source: mapsofindia.com

is the closest market to Kalmandasguri, situated 3 km away. The road connecting Baudiardanga to Kalmandasguri is not an all-weather road.

Kalmandasguri (and the rest of the district) comes within the agro-ecological region of West Bengal known as the Terai-Teesta Alluvial Region. The major part of village land is rainfed, with irrigation having expanded slowly over the years. Electrification of the village began in 2013. Kalmandasguri is a double-cropped region, with paddy and jute being the main crops. Potato, sugarcane and other vegetables are also grown. Yields are generally lower than in the rest of the State.

Despite infrastructural backwardness within the village, it was noted in 2006 that between 1995 and 2005, public action in the areas of provision of facilities for schooling, housing, land, and basic amenities like drinking water and sanitation had improved conditions of life in Kalmandasguri (Rawal 2006). Significant land reforms were carried out in the village under the Left Front.

Surveys Conducted in Kalmandasguri

Several surveys have been conducted in Kalmandasguri at different times over the last 27 years. In 1988–9, a household survey was conducted as part of the UNU-WIDER project on Rural Poverty, Social Change, and Public Policy (Sengupta and Gazdar 2003).

In 2005, a survey on "Landlessness and Indebtedness in Rural West Bengal" covered Kalmandasguri. In 2010, a survey of all households in the village was conducted

Table 1 *Caste-wise distribution of households, Kalmandasguri, 2005* number of households and per cent

	Hindu				Muslim	Total
	General	SC	ST	OBC		
No. of households	6	47	7	17	51	128
Per cent	4.7	36.7	5.5	13.3	39.8	100.0

Source: FAS survey data, 2005.

by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies, as part of its ongoing Project on Agrarian Relations in India.[6] In this article, I have used data from the 2005 and 2010 surveys.

In 2005, 128 households resident in the village were surveyed. Muslim households, all of whom belonged to Other Backward Classes (OBC), constituted 40 per cent of households. Scheduled Caste (SC) households, of which the Rajbangshi caste formed the major component, constituted 37 per cent of all households.

In 2010, the number of households resident in the village and surveyed rose to 147. In 2010, Muslim households were 42 per cent of all households, and Scheduled Caste (SC) households were 36 per cent of all households. The total population of the village was 701 in the survey of 2010; of the population, 52 per cent was male, and 48 per cent female.

Land Tenure in Kalmandasguri Prior to Land Reform

The earlier section focused on the general features of the land system of the princely state of Cooch Behar prior to and at the time of Independence. The present section focuses on land tenure in Kalmandasguri before the implementation of land reform. This section is based on interviews with village residents and Krishak Sabha activists.

Conditions in Kalmandasguri with respect to land tenure in the pre-Independence period reflected conditions as they existed in the rest of the native State. As we have seen, the *jotedars* of the pre-Independence period emerged as the largest landholding individuals in Cooch Behar in the post-Independence period. These individuals remained owners of vast expanses of land till the land reform came to be implemented, a process that came into full swing only after the Left Front came to office (see Sengupta and Gazdar 2003).

Shiben Chaudhuri (1986) wrote that the largest landlords in Cooch Behar owned up to 2000 *bighas* of land before land reform was implemented. Attached landless sharecroppers, who cultivated on a 50:50 crop share arrangement, lived on these

[6] A second-round sample survey will be conducted in the village in June 2015.

large landed estates. Such a pattern of land tenure existed in pre-land-reform Kalmandasguri as well.

The largest landowner in Kalmandasguri and other adjoining villages before the land reform was Haji Jaliluddin Miyan. He was a resident of the neighbouring village of Shibpur, and owned about 250 *bigha* (83 acres) of land in the region. Jaliluddin, together with his brothers, had inherited land from their father. Their father was a *jotedar* who owned an even larger land holding before Independence, and he paid regular revenues to the Cooch Behar State treasury. Jaliluddin died in 2013; his sons still live in the village. In an interview, the youngest of his sons, Mujuriddin Haji, spoke about the possessions of their family in the days before land reform.

Before the land reform, Jaliluddin Miyan lived in Shibpur with his brothers. They had separate houses, but located in the same compound. However, as their ceiling-surplus land was acquired by the government for redistribution, all of Mujuriddin's uncles left the village, one by one. Now the only two members of the family who still live in the village are Mujuriddin and his elder brother Jamaluddin Haji, who is also the priest in the local mosque, which is next to their house. Before land reform, they had many sharecroppers living around their house and agricultural land.[7]

Taoli Oraon is the local Krishak Sabha leader and was also elected member of local bodies at the village and district (gram panchayat and zilla panchayat) levels for two decades. He was head of the Bararangras gram panchayat, of which Kalmandasguri is a part, from 1986 to 1989. He has been a witness to the changes in land tenure within the village. Taoli Oraon said that, prior to 1977, there were only four landowning households in the village, all belonging to the same extended family. The major part of the rest of the population in Kalmandasguri was either landless or sharecroppers, all of whom lived on the land of the landlord. Apart from the sharecroppers, the landlords employed servants whose services were used for various household chores. These servants also lived around the landlord's house and were paid in terms of daily meals, known as *pete-bhate*, literally meaning "rice for the stomach."[8] Kapiluddin Miya, now in his seventies, was Jaliluddin Miya's *adhiar* (sharecropper) and continued to work for Jaliluddin's sons. He lived on the *jotedar*'s land and like most *adhiars* in Kalmandasguri, did not own draught animals. Kapiluddin often had to take loans to make ends meet.[9] Most of the sharecropper population in the village before land reform would supplement their meagre incomes from cultivation by labouring out at agricultural as well as non-agricultural tasks. Such labour was known as *kamli*. Kapiluddin Miya, mentioned earlier, worked as a sharecropper and *kamli* for Jaliluddin Miya.[10]

[7] Interview with Mujuriddin Haji, September 9, 2013.
[8] Interview with Taoli Oraon, September 7, 2013.
[9] Interview with Kapiluddin Miya, September 3, 2013
[10] Interview with Kapiluddin Miya, September 3, 2013.

Of the four households that owned land before land reform in Kalmandasguri, one was that of Lakhhikanta Debnath. Debnath's grandfather owned close to 32 acres of agricultural land, which was divided among his three sons. Lakhhikanta's and his uncles' families were the only landed households actually resident in the village before land reforms came to be implemented in Kalmandasguri. He said that it was also a practice in the village for landed families to employ their own relatives as sharecroppers. For instance, Upen Debnath was Lakkhikanta's sharecropper as well as his son-in-law. The majority of sharecroppers, however, came from poor and landless households.[11]

The general condition of sharecroppers in the village before land reform was very poor. Mohammad Kasu Miya was a sharecropper who worked on *jotedar* Jaliluddin Haji's land. A landless peasant himself, Kasu Miya lived on the landlord's land in Shibpur. He used to cultivate close to 7 acres of land, using his own draught bullocks. However, because of huge debts, he lost hold of the land as well as of the bullocks that he owned. The *jotedar* used to give out loans known as *duna*. By the terms of these loans, for every 1 *mon* (roughly 38 kg) of paddy borrowed, 3 *mon* had to be repaid. Kasu Miya said that living on the landlord's land came with many woes, and that he often faced harassment by the *jotedar*. The conditions ultimately forced him to shift to Kalmandasguri, where he lives at present (the *jotedar* told Kasu Miya to leave his land and flee). I asked why Kasu Miya did not resist the jotedar's authoritarian ways. He replied,

> Those were their times, the time of the *jotedars*. The poor had no power. Everything was as they wanted. Theirs was the panchayat, theirs the *pradhan*, theirs everything. Consider what those days were compared to now.[12]

Speaking of the general conditions prevailing in the village in the pre-land-reform period, Kasu Miya's wife Rahima Bibi recounted the difficulties they faced in raising their four children. The couple raised their children by doing various tasks to alleviate the poverty that followed from their landlessness. Kasu Miya caught fish, standing in leech-filled water, and sold the fish in the local market. He did not own a fishing net. Rahima Bibi worked on others' fields. The family had to eat wild tuber and sorghum rather than rice. Crime, including the looting of food grain, was rampant in the village before land reforms were implemented. Such crime directly related to the food insecurity prevailing in the countryside in the period. On one occasion, Kasu Miya was looted of the rice he was carrying while returning from work. Differences between the rich and poor were very stark. The rich were seen in the market wearing *dhoti panjabi*, while the poor wore only short towel-cloths (*gamcha*).[13]

[11] Interview with Lakkhikanta Debnath, September 3, 2013.
[12] Interview with Mohammad Kasu Miya, September 3, 2013.
[13] Interview with Rahima Bibi, September 3, 2013.

Kalmandasguri before land reform was thus characterised by a very skewed pattern of land ownership. Almost all the land of the region was owned by a single *jotedar* resident in the neighbouring village. In addition, there were only four landowning households actually resident in the village, all of whom were part of a single extended family. The majority of the population of Kalmandasguri were either landless workers or sharecroppers who lived on the land of the landlord. Most of the sharecroppers lived in debt.

Land Reform in Kalmandasguri

The differentiated and skewed land tenure structure of the region triggered the political mobilisation of the peasants' movement. The Krishak Sabha was at the forefront of the peasant movement. From the 1950s through the 1970s, it raised slogans of land redistribution and security of tenure for sharecroppers. Mass mobilisations in support of the demands of the rural poor culminated in land reform, which became of primary importance in the administrative policy agenda of the Left Front Government, which came to power in the State in 1977.

In 1957, it was decided in the district council of the Peasants' Union that the surplus land of the *jotedars* be taken over and distributed among the landless peasantry (Guhathakurta 2006). The popular slogans raised by the Cooch Behar Krishak Sabha in this period were "no rent on ceiling-surplus land" (*khas jamir bhag hobe na*) and "no rent without a receipt" (*rasit chhara bhag nei*).[14] Acquisitions of ceiling-surplus land by Krishak Sabha continued through the 1970s, even in the years of the Emergency. Along with this, the Krishak Sabha in the 1960s raised the slogan "occupy and cultivate surplus land" (*barti jomi dakhole rakha chas*); that is to say, sharecroppers were mobilised to resist eviction and continue to cultivate the fields in their possession.[15]

Krishak Sabha mobilisation in Kalmandasguri started gaining ground after the Left-led United Front Government came to office in 1967. The first of the movements was for the identification of *benami* land (that is, land held in other, or fictitious, names), held illegally by the *jotedars*. Baidyanath Ray, Bhuvaneshwar Ray, and Mohammad Ali were some of the first leaders of the movement within the village. In Cooch Behar in this period, through a "bloody movement that took the lives of Krishak Sabha activists" (De Sarkar 1986), about 60,000 *bigha* of *benami* and surplus land were identified and acquired for redistribution (*ibid.*).

Before land reform in Kalmandasguri, in most cases the *jotedars* did not provide sharecroppers with bullocks, seeds, and other inputs. However, when it came to dividing the produce, the *jotedars* often usurped more than half the produce. With

[14] Interview with Dinesh Dakua, August 26, 2013.
[15] Interview with Pradeep Nath, September 2, 2013.

regard to the *duna* loans that the *jotedars* advanced to sharecroppers in times of crisis, sharecroppers were often compelled to pay a higher rate of interest than was initially agreed upon. The popular support of the Krishak Sabha among the peasants in Kalmandasguri came from leading movements and spreading a general consciousness against these illegal exactions.[16]

Land reform in Kalmandasguri began after the Left Front government came to office, that is, after 1977. The earliest study of the results of the impact of land reform in the village comes from the village studies conducted by the World Institute of Development Economics Research (WIDER) to study rural change in West Bengal in 1987–9. Writing on the impact of land reform, Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar (2003) noted that the beneficiaries of redistributive land reform in Kalmandasguri in 1987–9 constituted one-third of all households in the village. The landless poor benefitted from land redistribution. Sengupta and Gazdar added that new incomes from land assigned to the poor helped substantially to improve the overall incomes of landless households. Incomes from assigned lands contributed 28 per cent of the total incomes of these landless households (*op. cit.*).

Taoli Oraon narrated to me the story of the process of land reform in Kalmandasguri. The Krishak Sabha, which had a sense of the grassroot realities of the village, identified ceiling-surplus land. This land was then acquired, often by means of mass action. The peasant movement had to face the physical resistance and brutalities of the armed henchmen (*lathihar*) of the large landlords whose surplus land had been identified. The peasants' organisation was also involved in negotiations with the large landowners, who moved the courts for injunctions on land redistribution, thus jeopardising the whole land reform process. These cases have gone on for decades and, in 2013, there were close to 21 ongoing legal cases that concerned the takeover of ceiling-surplus land in the Bararangras Gram Panchayat. In some cases, landowners were able to take advantage of long-drawn and costly legal procedures to take back land from erstwhile sharecroppers.[17]

With regard to the process of redistribution of ceiling-surplus land, lists of landless and sharecropper households were created by the Krishak Sabha, giving preference to households belonging to oppressed and minority social groups. It was ensured that sharecroppers received as much as possible of the land that they were cultivating. A plot of land identified to be ceiling-surplus was first allotted to the original occupiers and sharecroppers, and, if there was land left for further redistribution, it was allotted among other landless households. Then the Block Land Reforms Office took up the job of officially surveying land identified to be ceiling-surplus. After that, all parties concerned were called together to smoothen the process of actually acquiring and

[16] Interview with Taoli Oraon, September 7, 2013.
[17] Interview with Taoli Oraon, September 7, 2013.

redistributing the ceiling-surplus land.[18] In spite of all the disruption attempted by the landowners, the role of the Krishak Sabha and the elected local bodies ensured the success of land reform.

Kapiluddin Miya said that even after land was formally vested with the State, the *jotedar* continued to extract a share of the produce from the actual producers. It took the intervention of the Krishak Sabha to stop such illegal exactions.[19]

One of the important components of the land reform programme in West Bengal has been the redistribution of homestead land.[20] In Kalmandasguri, the significance of homestead land redistribution to the landless derived from the very character of housing in the pre-land-reform period. Prior to land reform, the house of the *jotedar* was surrounded by the huts of his many servants and sharecroppers. These servants provided services to him, including doing domestic chores, maintaining the security of the *jotedar*'s property, winnowing paddy, and other menial services. All these services were provided in exchange for a meagre payment in kind. These landless households lived mainly in structures made of sticks and thatch. When land reform brought poor households homestead land, they were freed from compulsory service to the *jotedar*.

Peasant mobilisation by the Krishak Sabha from the 1950s through the 1970s had already created favourable conditions for the implementation of land reform under the Left Front government after 1977. The land reform agenda was to become a success only when the peasants' organisation and a decentralised governance apparatus worked together to bring about change in the land holding structure of Kalmandasguri.

Land Tenure in Contemporary Kalmandasguri

In 2005, Kalmandasguri was a village dominated by small and marginal landholders. No household owned more than 10 acres of land. In a village in which, until the 1970s, there had been only four resident landowning households, survey data in 2005 showed that 78.2 per cent of households owned some agricultural land, with landlessness being restricted to 22 per cent of households. The average size of ownership holding of land was less than one acre per household.

[18] Interview with Taoli Oraon, September 7, 2013.
[19] Interview with Kapiluddin Miya, September 3, 2013.
[20] The West Bengal Acquisition of Homestead Land for Agricultural Labourers, Artisans and Fishermen Act was passed in 1976. This Act was to provide homestead land to the landless agricultural labourer households, majority of whom till then lived on the landlord's land, which tied them to the landlord's service. The Act gave agricultural labour households the freedom to choose their employer, without the fear of losing their homes and livelihood (Dasgupta 1984).

Table 2 *Caste-wise distribution of ownership holdings, Kalmandasguri, 2005* numbers, acres, and per cent

Land Size holding	Hindu								Muslim		All	
	General		Scheduled Caste		Scheduled Tribe		Other Backward Classes					
	No. (%)	Acre	No. (%)	Acre	No. (%)	Acre	No. (%)	Acre	No. (%)	Acre	No. (%)	Acre
Landless	0	0	7 (14.9)	0	1 (14.3)	0	1 (5.9)	0	19 (37.3)	0	28 (21.9)	0
0.01 to 2.5 acres	6 (100)	4.13 (100)	35 (87.5)	29.27 (63.9)	6 (85.7)	6.16 (100)	14 (82.3)	9.52 (50.5)	32 (62.7)	17.89 (100)	93 (72.7)	66.98 (72.1)
2.5 to 5 acres	0	0	5 (10.6)	16.55 (36.1)	0	0	1 (5.9)	3 (15.9)	0	0	6 (4.7)	19.55 (21.1)
5 to 10 acres	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (5.9)	6.33 (33.6)	0	0	1 (0.8)	6.33 (6.8)
Total	6 (100)	4.13 (100)	47 (100)	45.82 (100)	7 (100)	6.16 (100)	17 (100)	18.85 (100)	51 (100)	17.89 (100)	128 (100)	92.86 (100)

Note: Figures in parentheses denote percentages.
Source: FAS survey data, 2005.

The data show that the landlordism that characterised the village before land reform had been broken. The end came about with the implementation of land reform in the village, and with the redistribution of the *jotedar*'s ceiling-surplus land. Mujuriddin Haji, son of the *jotedar* Jaliluddin Miya, said that his family's land was taken away in two stages, of which he remembered vividly the second stage, which occurred around 1985–6. After the ceiling-surplus land was taken away, about 50 *bigha* or 16 acres of land were retained by his father; that land was further divided between Mujuriddin and his brothers. In 2013, Mujuriddin owned around 2.5 acres of land. The landless sharecroppers who once worked for the family received homestead land. Homestead land was provided on separate plots, taken from the *jotedar*'s surplus possession. Mujuriddin spoke of how they brought court injunctions to bear on the land redistribution process. They pursued the legal case until it reached the High Court, and then reached an agreement with the local Krishak Sabha, which was involved in identifying ceiling-surplus land and redistributing land. It was as a result of this agreement that sharecroppers were provided homestead plots on a separate piece of land, called the "colony." Mujuriddin accused his father of being "careless" in dealing with the family's landholding and for not evading the land ceiling limit. While his other uncles divided their landholdings, recording them under the names of different family members, his father had not done so. His father tried to register his land under the name of his two wives after the ceiling was declared, but this act was disallowed as illegal. As a result, according to Mujuriddin, they lost more land under the land ceiling clause than they need have.[21]

On life after land reform, Mujuriddin said that, since he was not used to doing agricultural work, he sold off land and other assets to meet the needs of the household. He illustrated the fallen status of his family with that of his house, which once used to be two-storeyed, and now has just one floor.[22]

The 2005 data show that Muslim households accounted for the largest share of beneficiaries in land redistribution. They constituted 47 per cent and 59 per cent of all beneficiaries of the redistribution of agricultural land and homestead land respectively. The distribution of homestead land to Muslim households is particularly significant in the light of the fact that Muslim households constituted the bulk of households without agricultural land (Table 3).

The data further showed that, in 2005, 16 out of 53 households that had received homestead land, either as original beneficiaries or inheritors, were previously landless. The other 37 households owned less than 2 acres each of agricultural land.

[21] The acts of dividing the land under different family members, relatives and others to escape the stipulated land ceiling by large land owners and jotedars, came to be known as benami land. Under the United Front government that is between 1967 and 1970, there were drives to identify these benami possessions and acquire them for redistribution.

[22] Interview with Mujuriddin Haji, September 9, 2013.

Table 3 *Number of beneficiaries and extent of land redistribution, by caste, Kalmandasguri, 2005* number of households, acres, and per cent

Social group	Agricultural land redistributed		Homestead redistributed		Other land redistributed	
	Number (%)	Acres	Number (%)	Acres	Number (%)	Acres
Hindu						
General	4 (11.1)	1.33 (7.9)	3 (5.7)	0.35 (5.3)	2 (10)	0.08 (3.7)
Scheduled Castes	8 (22.2)	3.87 (22.9)	12 (22.6)	1.66 (25)	5 (25)	0.73 (34.1)
Scheduled Tribes	5 (13.9)	4.5 (26.7)	5 (9.4)	0.59 (8.9)	1 (5)	0.2 (9.3)
Other Backward Classes	2 (5.5)	0.81 (4.8)	2 (3.8)	0.1 (1.5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Muslim	17 (47.2)	6.36 (37.7)	31 (58.5)	3.95 (59.4)	12 (60)	1.13 (52.8)
All	36 (100)	16.87 (100)	53 (100)	6.65 (100)	20 (100)	2.14 (100)
Average extent of land redistributed	0.47		0.13		0.11	

Note: The figures in parentheses represent the share in the total land redistributed in each category.
Source: FAS survey data, 2005.

Thus, the beneficiaries of homestead land distribution in Kalmandasguri were mainly landless and marginal peasants. This pattern of implementation of land reform helped to break the back of landlordism in the village and to alter completely the skewed pattern of land ownership that characterised the village.

Another notable feature of Kalmandasguri in 2005 was the drastic reduction in tenancy. In 2005, only 8 households had leased land in (land leased in covered an extent of 7.99 acres), while 3 households had leased land out (extent: 2.25 acres). This was, of course, a marked shift from Kalmandasguri in the past, when the majority of households were sharecroppers. In brief, land tenure in Kalmandasguri in 2005 was characterised by low tenancy and a predominance of small landholdings.

Contemporary Issues of Land Holding in Kalmandasguri

Landlessness was higher in Kalmandasguri in 2010 than in 2005. In 2005, 22 per cent of households were landless, a figure that increased to 23 per cent in 2010. Landlessness also increased among Muslim households. In 2005, 37 per cent of the Muslim households were landless; the corresponding figure was 43 per cent in 2010.

National Sample Survey (NSS) data show a trend of rising landlessness across rural India (Rawal 2013). It is noteworthy, however, that NSS estimates of landlessness in West Bengal were higher than estimates from village studies (*ibid.*). This

Table 4 *Caste-wise distribution of ownership holdings, Kalmandasguri, 2005* number, acres, and per cent

Land size-holding	Hindu								Muslim		All	
	General		Scheduled Caste		Scheduled Tribe		Other Backward Classes					
	No	Acre	No	Acre	No	Acre	No	Acre	No	Acre	No	Acre
Landless	1 (16.67)	0	6 (11.32)	0	1 (10)	0	0	0	26 (42.62)	0	34 (23.13)	0
0.01 to 2.5 acres	5 (83.33)	2.09 (100)	40 (75.47)	33.33 (59.46)	9 (90)	10.45 (100)	15 (88.24)	13.2 (61.31)	35 (57.38)	17.96 (100)	104 (70.75)	77.03 (71.27)
2.5 to 5 acres	0	0	7 (13.21)	22.72 (40.54)	0	0	2 (11.76)	8.33 (38.69)	0	0	9 (6.12)	31.05 (28.73)
Total	6 (100)	2.09 (100)	53 (100)	56.05 (100)	10 (100)	10.45 (100)	17 (100)	21.53 (100)	61 (100)	17.96 (100)	147 (100)	108.08 (100)

Note: Figures in parentheses denote percentages of column totals.
Source: FAS survey data, 2010.

Table 5 *Distribution of tenancies according to type of tenancies: Kalmandasguri, 2005, 2010* in numbers of households, acres and per cent

	2005	2010
Number of households leased in on share rent	5	13
Acreage of land leased in on share rent	7.41	7.91
Number of households leased in on fixed rent	3	10
Acreage of land leased in on fixed rent	0.58	5.47
Total number of households who leased in land	**8**	**23**
Total acreage of land leased in	**7.99**	**13.38**
Number of households leased out on share rent	1	5
Acreage of land leased out on share rent	0.17	7.5
Number of households leased out on fixed rent	1	7
Acreage of land leased in out fixed rent	0.08	4.07
Total number of households who leased out land	**3**	**12**
Total acreage of land leased out	**2.25**	**11.57**

Source: FAS survey data 2005, PARI survey data 2010.

observation applies to Kalmandasguri as well. While data from the Employment and Unemployment Surveys of the NSS say that 65 per cent of all rural households were landless in 2011–2, the corresponding figure for Kalmandasguri from the 2010 database was 23 per cent.

There was a marked increase in tenancy in Kalmandasguri between 2005 and 2010. Where only 8 households leased in land in 2005, there were 23 households leasing in land in 2010. The extent of land leased out by Kalmandasguri households rose from 2.25 acres in 2005 to 11.57 acres in 2010. One of the major changes in the character of tenancy relations in the village was the rise in short term fixed leases between 2005 and 2010. In 2005, only 0.58 acres of land were leased in by three Kalmandasguri households. However, in 2010, 5.47 acres of land were leased in by 10 households. Similarly more households leased out land on fixed rent contract in 2010, compared to 2005.

In 2010, a new form of short-term fixed lease arrangement with regard to potato cultivation was seen in Kalmandasguri. This was a cashless arrangement. The rent under this contract was considered to be included in the fertilizer applied for the potato cultivation by the lessee. Potato cultivation requires a higher fertilizer input than other crops grown in the village. The residual fertilizer suffices for the next crop grown and thus the input cost for fertilizer can be saved by the owner. Such lease arrangements are thus seen by owners as a means to boost soil fertility without incurring input costs on fertilizers. Most of the fixed-term leases reported in 2010 in Kalmandasguri were of this nature. Pradeep Nath, District Committee Member of the Krishak Sabha in Cooch Behar said that these short term fixed lease arrangement for potato cultivation were a relatively new development in the region, and have

appeared over the past ten years.[23] These leases, which involve bringing cash crops such as potato into the cropping pattern of the village, have integrated the village economy more closely than before with the market.

Concluding Remarks and Summary

Agrarian relations in the princely state of Cooch Behar at the end of the colonial period were characterised by a differentiated peasantry, ever-rising numbers of intermediaries, and an army of sharecroppers who were landless and lived on landlords' land. There was rising pressure from increasing rents on the lowest ranks of the peasantry, who increasingly were submerged in debt.

After Independence, the *jotedars* of princely Cooch Behar emerged as the largest landholders. They owned large tracts of land. In Kalmandasguri, most of the land in the village was owned by a single *jotedar*. There were only four landowning households in the village, all of which belonged to the same extended family. All other households in Kalmandasguri were landless and lived on the *jotedar*'s land. These households were subjected to regular evictions by the *jotedars*, and to several kinds of illegal exactions.

From the 1950s, the Cooch Behar Krishak Sabha had begun to organise the sharecroppers and poor peasants around the demand to take over the surplus land of *jotedars*, and resist illegal evictions of *adhiars*. When the United Front Government came to office, the movement to identify and take over *benami* land gained strength in Kalmandasguri. Continuous mobilisation created conditions conducive to the implementation of land reform when the Left Front came to power in 1977.

The immediate, and dramatic, consequence of land reform was to establish a vastly more equitable landholding structure in Kalmandasguri. The village surveys conducted in the 1980s in Kalmandasguri by WIDER also found that land reform had a substantial and positive impact on the incomes of landless households in the village. Incomes from assigned land accounted for 28 per cent of total incomes of the erstwhile landless households that were beneficiaries of this programme.

Before land reform, all but four households resident in Kalmandasguri were landless. After the land reform, 78 per cent of households had gained access to agricultural land (this does not count households that were beneficiaries of the programme to distribute homestead land). Before land reform, almost all crop land in the village was cultivated by sharecroppers. In 2005, only 8 households leased land in; together, they cultivated 7.99 acres.

[23] Interview with Pradeep Nath, September 2, 2013.

The data show the large participation of the Muslim population of the village in the land reform process. According to the 2005 village data, Muslim households constituted 47 per cent of the beneficiaries of the distribution of agricultural land, and 59 per cent of the beneficiaries of the distribution of homestead land.

Three changes of relevance to this discussion occurred in the village between 2005 and 2010. First, there was a marginal increase in landlessness. The proportion of landless households to all households was about 22 per cent in 2005 and 23 per cent in 2010. Secondly, there was an increase in the area under tenancy, from an extent of 7.99 acres in 2005 to 13.38 acres in 2010. Thirdly, there was a change in the terms of tenancy, from sharecropping to short-term fixed leases.

The implementation of land reform can be described as the single most important factor in transforming land tenure and the relations of production in Kalmandasguri. The challenges today are those of increasing productivity and yields, and improving infrastructure and people's livelihoods.

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List of Interviews

No.	Name of the respondent	Date of interview	Bio
1	Shakalu Barman	August 31, 2013	Participant in peasant movement of Cooch Behar between late 1940s–70s, from sharecropper family, now in his nineties.
2	Mujuriddin Haji	September 9, 2013	Son of Jaliluddin Miyan, erstwhile *jotedar* of Kalmandasguri, now a resident of Shibpur, a neighbouring village.
3	Taoli Oraon	September 3, 2013	Krishak Sabha leader of Kalmandasguri, elected representative in Bararangras village panchayat, 1986-9.
4	Kapiluddin Miya	September 3, 2013	Resident of Kalmandasguri, land reform beneficiary.
5	Lakkhikanta Debnath	September 3, 2013	Resident of Kalmandasguri.
6	Mohammad Kasu Miya	September 3, 2013	Resident of Kalmandasguri, land reform beneficiary.
9	Rahima Bibi	September 3, 2013	Resident of Kalmandasguri, land reform beneficiary.
10	Dinesh Dakua	August 26, 2013	Veteran Krishak Sabha leader and six-time member of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly for Mathabhanga constituency, held various ministerial posts under the Left Front Government.
11	Pradeep Nath	September 2, 2013	Krishak Sabha leader of Cooch Behar

Glossary

adhiar or halua	sharecropper.
benami	the term for land held by a person in another, often fictitious, name.
bigha	traditional measure of land used in Bengal, equivalent to 1/3 of an acre.
chukanidar	sub-tenant below the *jotedar* in the princely state of Cooch Behar.
dar chukanidar	sub-tenant below the *chukanidar*.
dara-dar chukanidar	sub-tenant below the *dar chukanidar*.
dhoti panjabi	the upper and lower traditional garment for men in Bengal.
duna	paddy loans given out by landlords.
gram panchayat	village panchayat, the lowest tier of the three-tier system of local self government in India. A *gram panchayat* is constituted from elected members from a *gram* or administrative village. The area under a gram panchayat may consist of a part of a village, or a group of contiguous villages, delineated by the State government as deemed suitable for administrative purposes.
jotedar	revenue-paying individual land holder or landlord.
kamli	servants labouring out at agricultural and non agricultural tasks.
krishiprajas	*de facto* tenants created after the Cooch Behar Tenancy Act of 1910 was passed; their *de jure* status was that of cultivating *raiyats*.
Krishak Sabha	Peasants' Union.
lathihar	armed henchmen employed by landlords to use force against agitating tenants and agricultural labourers.
mon	traditional measure of weight used in Bengal, equivalent to roughly 38 kg.
patani	cloth used as a body-wrap by women.
pete-bhate	system of paying servants performing agricultural and non-agricultural services on the landlord's estate in terms of daily meals.
pradhan	Chairperson of the gram panchayat.
raiyat	peasant cultivator.
tali chukanidar	sub-tenant below the *tasya chukanidar*.
tasya chukanidar	sub-tenant below the *dara-dar chukanidar*.
tasya tali chukanidar	sub-tenant below the *tali chukanidar*.
zamindar	statutory landlord created by Permanent Settlement, a revenue collection arrangement implemented in the Bengal Presidency by the British administration.