

# The Progression of The Sharecropper's Movement in the First Half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century North Bengal with Special Focus on Jalpaiguri District: An Overview

Mahmudul Hossain<sup>1</sup> & Swarnim Hingmang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of History, Nani Bhattacharya Smarak Mahavidyalaya, Alipurduar, WB, India.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Nani Bhattacharya Smarak Mahavidyalaya, Alipurduar, WB, India.

**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to analyse an important peasant struggle particularly the Adhiyar or sharecropper's movement whose importance lies in its political and ideological legacies in the peasant history of Bengal and India as well. To perceive these legacies the authors have focused on the role of various political and peasant organizations specially in the development of sharecropper's movement during the fourth decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Atmosphere of exploitation may not always lead to a movement without the political organization or peasant organization of the exploited. So, in this context the research problem is focused to explore the relationship between the peasant and Jotedar/zamindar, taxation system of the British government, the division of share on the agricultural productions, economic exploitation by the zamindars and the dynamism between political parties and peasant organization.

**Index Terms:** Adhiyar, peasant mobilization, exploitation, Zamindar, peasant, agriculture

## I. Introduction:

It is a fact that the freedom struggle generally starts with the participation of middle-class people. The middle-class people generally serve the role of pathfinders in this process. We are all well acquainted with the fact that almost all the countries across the globe witnessed the freedom movement, their degree of struggle may be varied, and Jalpaiguri is one region in the queue for enlisting its name and demarcating its struggle in the history of peasant movement in North Bengal. A section of elite class, upper and lower middle class and people belonging to poverty line were caught into a unique juxtaposition of an in fortunate movement but it resulted them to transforming themselves as an indestructible force played a very crucial role in the freedom movement. But the responsibility for spearheading the movement hugely rested upon the soldiers of the people belonging to this region while analysing the land revenue system, we came across to the two different kinds of systems during that period. Since there was the existence of permanent land revenue system in the Tetulia sub division of Rangpur District, Boda, Panchgarh, Debiganj, Patgram, Tetulia all these areas/regions came under the "Regulated" area. The remaining parts of Jalpaiguri District which were once a part of the kingdom of Bhutan were considered as "Non-Regulated" area (Dr. Sachindranath Dasgupta, n.d.). When we discussed about peasant movement in, we can find the traces or hints of similarity between peasant movement in Jalpaiguri from that of the rest parts of Bengal. But in case of Non-regulated area, the peasants struggle could not carve a strong niche and dip its firm roots in the region as compared to that of the intensity it generated in the regulated areas and the main reason of the indifference was the distinctive land revenue system existed in two different kinds of regions.

## II. The review of literature:

After reviewing numerous books and Journal articles the authors conditions of the peasant. Some of the relatable and notable works which highlights the struggle of the peasants are mentioned here. **Dhanagare** underlines the importance of the middle peasant in the composition of the local leadership, but adds that this section of the peasantry was not as widely or intensely involved in the struggle

as the poor peasants were. Besides Dhanagare argues, middle peasants had a conflict of interest with *bargadars*. **Alavi** says that middle peasants were not at all involved in the *Tebhaga movement*.

**A.R. Desai** ('Peasant Struggle in India', Bombay, 1979 and 'Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence', Delhi, 1986) has made a great contribution to the understanding of the nature of peasant struggles in India. He laments that though the literature of peasant struggles "*in other countries of the third world is available on a fairly extensive scale,*" it is not so in case of the Indian peasant movement. **Gyanendra Pandey** (Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh 1926-34: A Study in Imperfect Mobilization, Delhi, 1978) has done a commendable job in analysing the nature of mass movement and its relation with the national movement in UP. **M.H. Siddiqui's** study of agrarian unrest in the United Province has shown how the Congress leadership tried to organize peasants and how "the movement from below responded to the politics from above." He also tries to understand how Congress leadership coordinated the peasant awareness and harnessed that to the national liberation movement.

Such works by others on the development of mass and peasant movements in various areas of India are important. **David Hardiman** (Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat. Delhi, 1981) has written about peasant nationalists in Gujarat, **Arvind Narayan Das, K.Suresh Singh, Walter Hausser** and **Hanningharn** about the peasant movement in Bihar, and **Sunil Sen, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, Benoy Bhusan Choudhury, Partha Chatterji** (Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question. Calcutta, 1984), **A. Cooper** (Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggle in Bengali 1930-50, Calcutta, 1988) and others about the complex mass movement of Bengal. **Ravinder Kumar, Neil Charlesworth and Gail Omvedt** have worked on different facets of mass movements in Maharashtra. **Gyanendra Pandey** (Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh 1926-34: A Study in Imperfect Mobilization, Delhi, 1978), **M.H. Siddiqui and Kapil Kumar** (Peasants in Revolt. Delhi, 1984) have worked on UP, **Amalendu Guha** (Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral. Politics in Assam; Delhi, 1977) on Assam. In the same manner **B.Pavier** (The Telengana Movement 1944-51. Delhi, 1981), **Dharam Kumar and Sundarayan** have worked on South India to enrich the understanding of mass politics.

### III. Meaning of Sharecroppers' (Adhiyar or Bhag-chasi):

The word Adhi comes from the Bengali word '*Adhi*' which means one-half of the production. Most of the people of North Bengal regions were Adhiyars. They had to work as Adhiyar on the land of the Zamindars. The half part of the produce was taken by the Jotedar and half part went to the Adhiyar (Ranajit Dasgupta, 1992). In most of the cases the Adhi was not enough for the Adhiyars. For that reason, they were forced to take credit from the Jotedar with a high rate of interest. In most of the cases the Adhiyar were compelled to give their whole share to the Jotedar as part of the bargain conditioned, while taking credit, this situation created a great deal of resentment among the farmers in Jalpaiguri region and it was the beginning of the movement. The system of 'Bajey Aday' or 'abwab system' existed during this time (Dr. Sachindranath Dasgupta, n.d.). For example, 'Golamochhani' was one of the systems, Barkondajee (to serve in the interest of Barkandaj Battelion who has worked under various jotedars). As many as 18 kinds of 'Bajey aday' (illegal levy) existed at village level areas.

### IV. Sharecroppers' Movement in Jalpaiguri:

A few intellectuals have written about the peasant movement of Jalpaiguri or North Bengal. But it did not get the exposure or was not given due credit for various reasons (Dr. Sachindranath Dasgupta, n.d.). The Adhiyar movement which inspired the Tebhaga movement on the other hand was highly publicised and numerous books and articles were written based on Tebhaga movement various researches were conducted to analyse the Tebhaga movement. The indifference or lack of publicity led the one of the glorious chapters of peasant history buried under the lapse of time and made it difficult to trace the controls and development of the movement. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 1938 the Krishak Sangathan Samiti was established. Chunilal Basu was the first President, Gurudash Roy was the general secretary, Madhav Dutta was the Prochar Secretary and Sachin Dasgupta was the Cashier. It is needless to say that the Samiti was established primarily with the help of town based middle class peasant. Sachin Dasgupta said that as a congress worker in stages they were in touch with the Jotedar and rich farmers. At the initial stage, the agitations for peasant movement were not aware of the depressing situation of the poor peasants. Their sole purpose was to quench the thirst of gaining knowledge and studying the background relating to the deplorable conditions of the peasants.

When the leaders self-educated themselves and got the real and cruel picture of peasant mishap they understood that the root cause of the problem was the Adhiyar. So, it was an urgency as well as a necessity to launch a movement which must be Adhiyar centric.

Pradeshik conference of congress was announced during this time in the Jalpaiguri district. Madhav Dutta, was the full-time congress worker of Boda thana as well as the organizer of the congress committee of Boda thana. In order to conduct the Pradeshik conference Madhav Dutta came in Jalpaiguri with the volunteer Dal consisted of the young farmers. A big procession landed in Jalpaiguri from Boda and Panchgarh on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1939 A.D (Madhab Dutta, n.d.). Approximately one thousand farmers marched to Jalpaiguri with holding Lal jhanda (red flag) in their hands. The farmers placed their demands before the front-rank political leaders. The proposals of the farmers were accepted.

#### **V. The significance of Maynadighi Conference:**

The importance of maynadighi conference in the regional history of North Bengal was immense. The agriculture and economy of North Bengal generally depended of Adhiyars. But in every sphere of life, they were suppressed, neglected by the governmental authority. To make a separate peasant organization this conference played a very significant role. Next peasant conference of Pradeshik Krishak Sabha was held in 1940 (Panjia Conference) (Kunal Chatterjee, 1987). In the Adhiyar movement the Maynadighi conference played the role of pathfinder.

It is a matter of great pride when the leaders successfully manage to disseminate the movements of any kind breaking the threshold and giving it a new recognition not only regionally but nationally as well. Generating a vigorous level of enthusiasm among the 'have nots' or 'backward classes' igniting the hope among the depressed class that their interest 'or demands' could be fulfilled. The ordinary or depressed people of the society joined the movement to fulfil their own interest. Whether the 'class struggle' plays a vital role for the social upliftment or not has become debatable matter. But one thing which is universally acceptable is without any kind of involvement in the freedom movement, the class struggle can't gain its momentum. This is not exceptional in case of the district of Jalpaiguri also. Before the Indian freedom movement, the working-class consciousness was not that matured. They were not aware of the fact that their demand can be fulfilled by channelling their enthusiasm through a proper route which was possible only with the formation of a strategically organised movement.

#### **VI. The role of political parties in the development of the movement:**

Generally, it can be said that the Jalpaiguri became the main hub of the freedom struggle. In the social life of the people of Jalpaiguri this new moment left tremendous implications. The non-cooperation and khilafat movement deeply affected the socio-political life of Jalpaiguri district. In 1920 when the conference of Indian National congress was held in Kolkata a young freedom fighter named Khagendranath Dasgupta organised a peasant uprising in Jalpaiguri district. Till this period there was no congress committee in Jalpaiguri region. In 1921, for the first-time district congress committee was established under the leadership of Jagodindra Raikat.

Khagendranath Dasgupta along with Byomkesh Majumdar, Madan Sanyal started to visit different villages in order to propagate the concept of Swaraj. Very soon various branches of the congress committee begin to establish. The president of this committee was Moktar Rashik Lal Ganguly and Shiv Dayal Paul was the secretary. In order to generate a strong ethos and consciousness of needs and demands among the villagers the congress leaders aimed to disseminate the message beyond the boundaries of the rural area and took a step forward and launched it full-fledgedly to the urban areas. Different kinds of agenda were proposed in order to spread the message and activities in places like Boda, Patgram, Falakata, Madarihata, Mynaguri etc. it is needless to say that the success of non-cooperation movement, ideology and activities of Gandhiji, strong appearances of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das constructed a favourable environment for the launch and spread of peasant and workers movement in Jalpaiguri District and its adjacent areas.

In 1921 when Chittaranjan Das, Basanti Devi, Maulana Samsuddin came to Jalpaiguri the people of the region welcomed them warmly and started to spread the message of the necessity of the direct involvement of the people in the Indian Freedom Movement amalgamating the message with the rich ideology pursued by Gandhiji.

After the civil disobedience movement, the district congress committee lost its spirit provisionally. After few days they started to organise a new agitation with the peasants. During this period Krishak Praja Party came into power in Bengal and announced emancipation of Zamindari system. The peasant came out on the street and demonstrated against this step. Though in reality the Fazlul Hoque's cabinet ministry did not implement this but this decision left a bad taste and dissatisfaction begun to erupt as a result various peasant organisation came into existence during this period. Jalpaiguri district congress committee and the Bengal volunteers recruited Rajbandi Prafulla Kumar Mitra and Madhav Dutta, the leader of the Anushilan Samiti as the permanent congress worker of the Krishak Front (Peasant organisation). In case of Jalpaiguri district congress-communist were also included in congress socialist party. Madhav Dutta was the CSP as well the member of the left communist party. In this way Madhav Dutta started to establish peasant organization at Boda, Panchgarh region etc and this was a great encouragement for CSP of Jalpaiguri District and they alienated their activities along the flow of communist movement. We can say that 1934 was the turning point because from this period onwards the people were not only interested in the concept of Freedom but they also started to take initiative regarding the social information and economic upliftment. The communist party of India established its branch in Jalpaiguri in 1939 in the presence of Somnath Lahiri. The district congress party announced the name of Gurudash Ray, Dhiren Kar and Sachin Dasgupta from Congress socialist party of India. In the later period after the resignation of Madhav Dutta he joined the communist party. In this way the peasant movement in this district began to develop.

Similar incident was witnessed in other regions as well. In 1938 the members of the Congress Socialist Party became more powerful than the member of the Congress Party. During this period there were few parties. In the later period, after the independence Praja Samaj Tantri Party, congress socialist party came into existence. Communist party had separated themselves from congress party. Bangiya Pradeshik Congress Sammelon was held in 1939 in the presence of Subhas Chandra Bose (Dipankar Bhatyacharya, 1992). It can be said that in the Conference held in 1939 in Jalpaiguri District the Bangiya Pradeshik Congress Committee for the first time not only put the deputation for abolition the permanent land revenue settlement, but they advocated for demolishing any kind of zamindari system. Even the conference proposed a resolution keeping in mind every progressive peasant organisation to put deputation before Bengal land revenue commission about the condition of the depressed section of the population. These activities actually displayed the existence of a strong peasant movement during this time.

These activities made a great impact on Tetulia Thana (Boda, Panchagarh, Debiganj etc), Maynaguri, Rajganj, Sadar Area. The main subject of the deputation was---

1. Land to the tillers (*Langal jar-jamin tar*)
2. To stop forcefully shifting of the Adhiyars
3. To take initiative against the system of Mahajani Sudhkhori
4. Stop suppressing while collecting the revenue
5. Decrease of the land revenue tax
6. Withdrawing the validity of British Administration (it actually started here in Jalpaiguri from 1930 A.D onwards) (Dr. Sachindranath Dasgupta, n.d.)

The British government always tried to dismantle the peasant movement and for that purpose they have taken various measures. Though there was a great barrier from the end of the Police during the Adhiyar movement, the district Administration announced 144 Decree under the leadership of Nabab Mosharraf Hossain (Dr. Sachindranath Dasgupta, n.d.). The British establishment attacked any kind of suspicious activities of peasants, they forced them to stop the activities of Sabha and Samiti, and called upon a great amount of torture to the peasants. In other words, the establishment made every effort and left no stone unturned to suppress the movement.

In the later period Adhiyar movement transferred into the famous Tebhaga movement. The movement was not only confined to Jalpaiguri region but had spread among Nineteen Districts of the then Bengal. Tebhaga movement got its momentum from the month of November 1946 and spread over Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Midnapore, Jashore, Khulna and Maymansing. The uprising made a great impact on North Maymansing including the rest parts of North Bengal region.

Tebhaga movement which was took place in Jalpaiguri and the the adjoining areas which had its tremendous impact were at Boda, Panchagarh, Debiganj, Sundar Dighi which now belongs to the modern-day Bangladesh. The other parts of Dooars till then was unorganized. Though the region (Dooars) was politically and socially unorganised the region was very much affected by this movement. Batabari, Pagla Deunia was the place where for the first time Tebhaga movement was inaugurated. A few peasants' movement also occurred after the independence but it was not as effective and powerful as the previous movement.

## CONCLUSION

In terms of structural setting, class character and historical circumstances these movements present a wide spectrum. In this concluding chapter our task is to relate these diverse facts systematically in the hope of searching the reasons and varied factors that led to the awakening of the peasants' movement. In this paper, we have seen different types of adhiyars or sharecroppers' movement but it is a fact that only the Tebhaga movement has gone down in the history of India as the first politically organized sharecroppers' struggle. The importance of the Adhiyar movement lies in its political and ideological legacies. The participation of women in large numbers also skyrocketed their confidence and which sparked or ignited their sense of responsibility towards the suffering of other Women and this emboldened the concept of women empowerment which also led them to challenge some of the misogynist social practices. The Adhiyar movement also helped the Kisan Sabha to become one of the powerful peasant organisations in the rural society.

The escalating peasant movement created a stir of fear amongst the landlords which challenged their dominant superiority over the sharecroppers and land owners (peasant) peasants' communities who had been a tool of exploitation under the hands of wealthy landlords for generations. The press so far which had maintained a neutral stand and which should had been a voice for the agitating peasants did not play a positive role in the struggle. The press which otherwise were socially progressive and politically anti-imperialist changed their tune and in the name of maintaining "law and order" and "aggravating the class tensions" diverted the course of the movement which could had engulfed the greedy intentions of the rich landlords and would have made them powerless. When the movement started basically as a demand for a different mode of the distribution of the land-produce- "Tebhaga"- rich and middle-class peasants were not hostile to it (Kunal Chatterjee, 1987). But gradually when the nature of the movement started to change and new demands like requisition of Khas lands and equal right of catching fish in the ponds became clear, the rich and even some middle peasants changed sides. This change of attitude by the middle peasants, who were the backbone of rural society, strengthened the hands of the Government. Here it is clear that the BPKS strategy of solidarity of the peasants failed fully. Ultimately this antagonism of the middle peasant at the later phase hampered the movement. The absence of working-class support in the movement was probably an offshoot of the CPI's tactical misunderstanding of the situation (Asok Majumdar, 1993).

We have witnessed various ups and downs of the movement but some of the notable features which defined the movement are the peasant organisation like BPKS'S popularity were not only confined to its regional level but was able to raise its profile and prominence at a national level as well from the standpoint of the so called Adhiyar or sharecroppers' movement and left a great impetus for the peasant community in Bengal and India.

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