

CHAPTER – TEN

ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF LEFT POLITICS 1935-1953: AGRARIAN DISTURBANCES AND THE ABOLITION OF THE ZAMINDARI SYSTEM.

Leftism in India emerged out of the matrix of the Indian National Movement. It was both a nationalist as well as revolutionary movement. The disillusionment of radical middle class youths with Gandhian constraints which found initial expression through a last outburst of terrorism in Bengal and Punjab between 1928 and 1934, was also contributing significantly to the growth of the Left by the end of this period, as revolutionaries abandoned the path of individual violence for mass struggle and Marxism. The Communist Party of India (C.P.I.) which was formally banned in 1934 adopted the programme of a broad united national front of all anti-imperialist forces. The shift of many terrorists to C.P.I provided the cadre-base for a major extension into districts.

The theoreticians of the Bengal Provincial Communist Party, in their prepared lectures in the Party Training School held in Calcutta in 1943, divided the communist movement in India into the following stages: first stage, 1933-39; second stage, 1930-41; third stage, June 1941- 43¹. From 1933 onwards the Bengal Provincial Communist Party began to function in a much more organized and systematic manner². As the C.P.I was then an illegal party, the members had to work underground. This was the time when a large number of political prisoners in various jails and detention camps in Bengal were drawn to the ideas of communism and they became members of Communist Consolidation. Most of them came from Anusilan Samiti and Jugantar Party³. After 1937, when the government released the political prisoners, the Communist Party got large number of new cadres from them. These cadres went to their respective districts to form party units there. The Party was transformed from a small group to a full-fledged party during the period 1937-39⁴.

It was against such a political background that new political developments began to take place in Malda, particularly in some parts of the district. In Malda, from late 1920 onwards the radical views within the District Congress

began to develop. Disillusioned with the factional squabbles within the local congress, a group of youth said to be the followers of Subhas Chandra Bose rose to the occasion under the leadership of Atul Kumar. Kaliranjan Das, Jotirmoy Sharma, Sudhir Kumar Raha and Atul Kumar founded the District Youngman's Association in 1927. A meeting of the Association was held on 7 and 8 November, 1928 in Malda. The meeting was attended by Philip Spratt, Dharani Kanta Goswami and Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta⁵. Philip Sprat was of opinion that communism was the only way to end the present plight of the society. However, communism could not be attained without revolution, which involves bloodshed. He pointed out that the youth movement must have some political aims and in this aspect, he wanted that the Bengali youth community should follow the examples of Italy and China⁶. Dharani Kanta Goswami explained in details in Bengali the speech of Philip Spratt, and observed that 'I find before me a gathering of some people of the depressed classes. It appears to me that the Youngman's Association of Malda has directed attention towards people belonging to the lower stratum of society--people whom we are used to hate as of low origin. I have not come across people of such a class in any other youth association or any national institution. I am not sure it you have seen any⁷.

From this time onwards, we can trace the emergence of a "Left" trend in the congress politics of Malda, under the leadership of Atul Kumar. Although there were various ideological differences or factional rivalries among these 'Left' forces and their leaders who later on joined various leftist political parties, yet a sharp difference within the district congress leadership could be witnessed since then. Interviewing the persons who were closely connected with the affairs of the district it may be said that the rightist forces were very powerful in Malda District Congress and they never allowed the left forces to assume the direction of affairs⁸.

The withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1934 was a great disappointment for the youth and student of Bengal. They began to think of changing their ideology and to search for an alternative ideology different from the traditional one. Thus, under the impact of this trend, as elsewhere in

Bengal, youth activists who had previous links with revolutionary groups, young congress workers and politically advanced student cadres of Malda, began to lean toward Socialism and Marxism and some accepted these. In Malda, this new genre of young political activists found an energetic leader in Sudhendu Jha, popularly known as Manik, who later became one of the founder members of the district unit of the Communist Party. Manik Jha was born in 1917 in a Maithili Jotedar family of Nagharia in Malda. His family was closely related to Harimohan Jha, one of the chief organizers of revolutionary terrorist activities in Malda. Another of his relation was Atul Kumar, one of the prominent leaders of the District Congress and a close associate of Subhash Chandra Bose⁹. The radical ideas of Harimohan Jha left a strong impression on his mind. In 1928, Harimohan Jha attended the conference of Peasants and Workers Party in Calcutta. On his return, he gave Manik some periodicals and literatures like *Bijali*, *Langal* and *Dhumketu* to read. It was through these writings that Manik first were exposed to Socialism and Marxism. In 1937, Atul Kumar introduced Manik with Naren Chakraborty who was an active member of the Anusilan Party. Naren Chakraborty had to undergo prison and detention camps for a number of years. While in Berhampur Jail, he read Marxist literature and soon accepted a Marxist position. Through Harimohan Jha, both Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty got in touch with the illegal Communist Party¹⁰. In 1937, they went to Bankura to attend the *Bishnupur Rashtriya Sammelan* where they met M.N. Roy. M.N.Roy suggested them to form the units of B.P.S.F and Krishak Samiti in Malda¹¹.

When Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty came back to Malda, they brought in new political and organizational ideas and propagated these among the Malda students. In fact, since the formation of the Bengal Provincial Students' Federation in 1936 in Calcutta and All India Students' Federation in the same year in Lucknow, a new wave started to develop in the students' movement in Bengal¹². A new infrastructure was framed out of which a militant anti-imperialist, anti-feudal and anti-fascist students' movement emerged in Bengal. Centering round various current issues like the unconditional release of all political prisoners including the prisoners of Andaman, complete independence of India, withdrawal of all oppressive Acts

and Ordinances imposed by the government, recognition of the students' organization by the government and universities, introduction of compulsory and free primary education throughout Bengal etc. an united students' movement of all left wing students' created a sensation in the political movement in Bengal since the late thirties¹³.

The efforts of Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty to form a district unit of the BPSF soon found organizational shape. The first unit of the BPSF was formed in the Maldaha Zilla School on 14 May 1937 of which Sudhir Chakraborty was elected the secretary. The other members were Krishnabandhu Das, Chuni Sen, Basudeb Prasad Behani and Md Yasin. Later another unit was formed with the students of A.C.Institution. Soon the leaders felt the necessity of expanding their activities to village areas also. At the initiative of Manik Jha, a students' unit was formed at Nagharia High School. The district committee of Students' Federation was formed in January 1938 and Baidyanath Sarkar, a student of A.C Institution was elected its first secretary¹⁴.

Calcutta experienced a massive movement throughout the period 1937-38 for the release of the Andaman prisoners under the leadership of the BPSF. A mass meeting, organized by the BPSF, was held on 14 August 1937 at the Calcutta Town Hall demanding the release of all political prisoners of Andaman¹⁵.The youth and student of Malda also demonstrated their protest against the government's attitude and showed sympathy with the hunger strikers in Andaman. The 'Andaman Day' was observed by the Students' Federation of Malda on 14 August 1937¹⁶.

Another significant development in Malda during this time was the formation of the district unit of the Krishak Sabha. In March 1937, the first session of the Bengal Provincial Peasants' Conference was held at Patrasayer, Bankura. In this conference Bangiya Pradeshik Krishak Sabha (BPKS) was formed¹⁷. In Malda, the district organizing committee of the Krishak Sabha was formed in 1938¹⁸.Its prominent leaders were Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty, Phanibhusan Sarkar, Ajoy Ghosh, Nakul Karmakar of Nababganj¹⁹. Thus, for the first time in the political life of the district, serious attempt was made to

organize and activize the peasants not only around broad national political questions but also around explicitly stated peasant issues.

The chief slogans of the District Krishak Sabha were abolition of the zamindari system and land to the tillers. Along with these, demands were raised for stopping collection of *hat tola* or levy by *hat* owners and *ijaradars* from the middle and poor peasants who came to the *hats*. This practice was widely prevalent in many parts of Bengal. There was extensive rural resentment against this practice. An enquiry by the Government of Bengal in 1940 showed that zamindars collected tolls from both sellers and buyers at the 6000 *hats* in the province at excessive rates. The *tola* was collected either by his staff or by *ijaradars*²⁰.

In Malda, the Hat Tola movement first started at Nababganj under the leadership of Ramendranath Mitra. The peasants were called upon by the Krishak Sabha to refuse payment of *tola*. A movement around this issue took place at Ramchandrapur *hat* of Nababganj. In organizing the movement at Ramchandrapur, Ramendranath Mitra was assisted by a number of Krishak Sabha activists like Mokim Karmakar, Sadhua Tanti, Taru Mian, Naba Biswas, Mainuddin Ahmad, Tamijuddin Biswas and Altaf Hossain Mian²¹. Manik Jha and Naren Chakroborty also came from Malda to organize the movement. The pattern of the movement was: '... volunteers moving in a procession with *lathis* and flags throughout the fair and asking the shop and stall keepers not to pay *tola* to zamindars. They threatened some of the shopkeepers with social boycott if they did not pay heed to their order and several times, they cordoned the zamindar's men who went to collect the usual *tola*'²².

The *hat ijaradars* and his hired men threatened the peasants. However, all their attempts to crush the movement failed which eventually led them to arrive at a compromise settlement. The success of the Hat Tola movement at Ramchandrapur inspired the Krishak Sabha activists to start similar movements in other areas of the district. Successful campaigns were launched in other villages of the district like Sripur of Ratua p.s., Mathurapur of Manikchak p.s. and Aiho of Old Malda p.s.²³. This successful agitation against the arbitrary toll collection provided great impetus to the peasant movement.

The broad peasant unity shown during the movement assumed a new dimension a few years later when the district of Malda witnessed a more militant type of peasant movement that came to be known as the Tebhaga movement.

In this way, a large number of peasants in Malda were acquainted with the demands of the Krishak Sabha. The Krishak Sabha leaders put emphasis on basic agrarian issues, which were, however, linked up with the freedom struggle of the country. The peasant leaders clearly stated that the success of agrarian revolution mainly depended on the liberation of the country from foreign yoke. The major task would remain unfulfilled without the participation of peasants in the anti-imperialist struggle of the country. After the success of the Hat Tola movement Manik Jha, under the banner of the Krishak Sabha , organized another movement of the peasants against the zamindar of Chanchal who owned vast landed property in the district. In 1938, a devastating flood occurred in Malda which resulted in a massive loss of crops. The peasants wanted exemption from payment or rent. However, the zamindar denied to consider their appeal and resorted to oppression to collect the arrear of rent²⁴.

Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty realized that the time was ripe for organizing a movement in Chanchal.Thus, a 'No Rent' campaign was organized. In this context, the name of Dahari Bin, a turbulent peasant activist should be mentioned who played an instrumental role in organizing the No Rent movement in Chanchal²⁵.At this stage, Manik Jha made contact with Muzaffar Ahmed who deputed Sujat Ali, one of the earliest leaders of the BPKS, to give the agitation of the peasants a definite shape. Manik Jha and Sujat Ali succeeded in organizing a large number of peasants. A huge procession of nearly six thousand peasant marched through the town of Englishbazar and gheraoed the Ramnagar cutchery of the Zamindar of Chanchal²⁶. The peasants demanded not only exemption of rent, but also better irrigation facilities and stoppage of payment of *hat tola* to ijaradars. The peasant demonstration put the Raja of Chanchal under tremendous pressure and he announced exemption of payment of rent for a certain

period²⁷. The "No Rent" campaign in Chanchal was so popular that it received wide sympathy and support throughout a vast area of the district²⁸. It was the first peasant rally of this kind in Malda and thus occupies a distinct place in the annals of peasant agitations in the district.

All this activity was coincided with the preparation for the holding of the district political conference by the left wing section of the local congress. Both the Krishak Sabha leaders and left-wingers of the District Congress led by Atul Kumar were eager to link up emerging peasant movement with the nationalist politics. They were also keen to strengthen the congress Left. Atul Kumar, the undisputed leader of the left-wing section of the District Congress, entrusted Manik Jha the duty of organizing the District Political Conference in Malda²⁹. Nagharia was chosen as the venue for the District Political Conference held on 29 January 1939. The conference was presided over by Kiran Sankar Roy. Subhas Chandra Bose attended the Conference as the Chief Guest, who received a most enthusiastic reception by the people of Nagharia³⁰. A great enthusiasm prevailed among the peasants who attended the Conference. The people of Amanura, Rohanpur and Singhabad responded positively to the call of the Conference at Nagharia and marched in procession with Bose and Kiran Sankar Roy³¹. The conference raised voice against imperialism and demanded the abolition of the zamindari system³². Addressing the people at Nagharia, Bose stressed on the need of establishing rural committees and Mahila Samities as many as possible. In his opinion, the struggle for swaraj had not ended yet. The country could achieve independence if it could maintain its unity and harmony, whereas the global political situation was favourable³³.

The Hat Tola movement, No Rent movement against the Zamindar of Chanchal and participation of a large number of peasants at the Nagharia Conference reflected the increasing radicalization of the masses in the district. In April 1937, Manik Jha attended the All India Kishan Conference in Gaya as a delegate from Bengal. As Manik Jha recalls, 'during the conference Sujat Ali told me that "Kakababu" (Muzaffar Ahmed) want to meet you. I went to his room with Sujat Ali. Kakababu told me that the Krishak Sabha leadership is

interested in holding the coming state conference in Malda and we like to entrust you the task of making the conference a success. I became so nervous and told Kakababu that the task is difficult one, because there is no district unit of the Communist Party in Malda yet. Kakababu replied that everywhere communist party is formed through such process of struggle that Malda experienced lately. we assure him that we will try our best to make the conference a successful one and proposed Nagharia as the venue of the conference as the area in recent times organize the District Political Conference with much success'.³⁴

Therefore, the third session of the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha was held at Nagharia on 4-6 May 1939. Earlier it was decided that the conference would be held in the district of 24 Parganas. But due to the oppressive measures taken by the Government, the venue was shifted to Nagharia of Malda district. At that time, the total number of members of the BPKS stood not less than fifty thousand.³⁵ Prior to the conference, a number of peasant movements, organized by the Malda Krishak Sabha, established the organization in the mindset of the peasant of the district and contributed to the success of the Nagharia Conference. Abdullah Rasul demanded that not less than seventy five thousand peasants attended the Conference. The District Magistrate, however, reported that the Conference was attended by nearly fifty thousand people. At the same time, he admitted that the conference of BPKS at Nagharia created a sensation throughout the district³⁶. The Conference resolved to intensify peasant struggle, bring greater numbers of poor peasants and *adhiars* into the movement, train up peasant volunteers and make them class-conscious through political training and to activate the priming units of the Krishak Sabha for further struggle³⁷.

FORMATION OF COMMUNIST PARTY IN MALDA DISTRICT

After the Krishak Sabha conference at Nagharia, the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party felt the necessity of forming the party unit in Malda district on an organized basis. Accordingly, Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty and Kshitish Das were given party membership. In July 1939, Biswanath Mookherjee was sent by the Provincial Committee to Malda to organize the

party there. Three party members of the district-- Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty and Kshitish Das were present in a secret meeting held in Malda town in the house of B. Poddar in July 1939. Biswanath Mookherjee conducted the meeting. The Malda District Organizing Committee of CPI was formed in that meeting. Manik Jha proposed the name of Naren Chakraborty as the secretary of this organizing committee, which was seconded by Kshitish Das. Manik Jha, Kshitish Das and Biswanath Mookherjee became the members of this committee³⁸.

This organizing committee was authorized to 'give party membership to other workers. Within a short time, a number of political workers belonging to the Anusilan Samiti joined the CPI. Ramprafulla Roy, Moni Gosain and Kali Das, former Anusilan Samiti activists, were given party membership. Ramprafulla Roy took the initiative in forming a party unit at Chanchal. Mahesh Sarkar and Suresh Sarkar became the first two party members at Chanchal . Ramraghab Lahiri and Jiban Goswami of Kaligram joined the CPI and played a vital role in forming a party unit at Kaligram³⁹. At Gajol, one of the important centers of the Tebhaga movement in later years, the initiative of establishing a party unit was taken by Amrita Turi⁴⁰.Naren Chakraborty and Mani Gosain collected a band of young people in the Golapatty Byayam Samiti in 1939. This was outwardly a physical training centre of local youth. However, this was actually utilized as a forum of the CPI. The leaders of the Samiti secretly baptized the members with communist philosophy and acquainted them with CPI literature⁴¹.Thus by the end of 1939 the CPI unit in Malda district was consolidated as an organized political party.

The district party was successful to forge a link with a sizeable section of the middle class of the town, such as lawyers, doctors, teachers etc. which indicated the growing strength of the party⁴². During this time the communists worked within the Indian National Congress. Sometime they became office-bearers of the District Congress Committee. Manik Jha became the Assistant Secretary of the Malda Congress. During 1939-40, the number of communists in the executive committee of the District Congress was five⁴³. In fact, the communists in Malda were following the general trend of the communist

movement in India. In 1935, the Indian communists were told by the Comintern that they should form a ‘united front’ with the congress against British imperialism and organize peasants for “agrarian revolution in India”. In sum, it meant that CPI should join hands with left wing of the congress and British imperialism⁴⁴. This directive was enunciated in the well known Dutt-BRADLEY thesis which stated that the Congress was no longer a “bourgeois reformist political organization” but a revolutionary party of Indian people, and leaders as Gandhi and Nehru were regarded as “the popular leaders of the movement”⁴⁵. Therefore, following this general line, the young Marxists of Malda used the political platform of the congress in the best possible way. Although the landlord-dominated congress committee in Malda proved to be unfriendly, the necessity of forming a united front against imperialism and feudalism was aptly realized by the communists⁴⁶.

A new period began in the history of the CPI along with the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. Following the outbreak of the war, the CPI Politburo in a resolution adopted in October 1939 characterized the war as an ‘imperialist war’. As the communists considered the Congress as the main platform of the liberation struggle, it urged the Congress to launch mass struggle against British Imperialism for the emancipation of the country. The local CPI leaders carried on anti-war propaganda through meetings and posters. The communists announced ‘Na ek pai, na ek bhai’- means not one paisa for the expense of war or a brother to fight in the war⁴⁷. The district administration reacted sharply and Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty along with a number of communist activists were arrested under D.I.R. for anti-war activities. The Police and Intelligence Branch made wholehearted efforts to suppress the communist activities in the district⁴⁸. A number of leaders of the local Communist Party including Kshitish Das, Moni Gosain, Kali Das, Ramprafulla Roy were able to evade arrest and went underground⁴⁹.

Therefore, in the early 1940 the district party organization was in great crisis. At this critical moment several party workers and active sympathizers, who were not exposed to the administration, carried the party’s messages to the people. The mass fronts of the party, such as the Krishak Sabha and the

Students Federation played an important role in keeping alive the party organization⁵⁰. In a police report of February 1941, it was stated that the Krishak Sabha activists and students functioned in the districts of Dinajpur, Malda, Rajshahi and Faridpur and the communists were working up popular issues⁵¹.

With the German attack on Soviet Union in June 1941, there came a dramatic change in C.P.I.'S attitude towards the War. After some initial confusion the communists declared the war as a '*peoples' war*' and decided to support the British against Fascism. They characterized the fascist powers as the main enemies of the Indian freedom struggle and urged the people to take side with those forces, which were engaged in war against the Axis Powers. Being guided by this policy the Provincial Committee launched anti-Jap movement throughout Bengal during December 1941- March 1942. An important anti-Fascist meeting was held at Kaligram in March 1942 under the leadership of Ramprafulla Roy, which was attended by a large number of people. The Indo-Soviet Friendship Association was formed in Malda in 1942⁵². A Student meeting was held under the banner of Students Federation at A.C Institution in Malda town on 4 April 1942. The speakers extolled the Soviet Union and urged the Indians to fight against the Fascists so that India might overthrow British imperialism through Soviet leadership⁵³. The report of Superintendent of Police, Malda indicated that the students were helping the main organization of the communist party in their anti-fascist propaganda by the formation of Civil Defence Committees and enlistment of volunteers⁵⁴.

In July 1942, the ban imposed on the CPI was withdrawn and legal rights were restored to the party. The district leaders came out of the prison and devoted themselves to party work. In such a situation, the congress adopted on 8 August 1942 the famous Quit India resolution. Following its adoption, Indian masses rose into revolt, which became famous as the Quit India Movement. However, the Krishak Sabha and the CPI were reluctant to support an anti-British campaign in accordance with the '*people's war strategy*'. For the CPI, the challenge to the state power through a mass

mobilization was unwarranted at a time when the fascist aggression was imminent. To P.C. Joshi, the Quit India Movement was a national suicide⁵⁵.

But the theory of the “Peoples War” and “United Front, could not at all impress the middle class of Malda. On the contrary, the local CPI workers were bitterly criticised by the District Congress⁵⁶. The pro-War strategy caused a schism not only among the CPI activists, but among the sympathizers as well. ‘Those of the younger generation’, as an official report claims, were not inclined to ‘committing them to support the government’⁵⁷. In fact, in the Malda town the first open demonstration in support of the Quit India demand was organized by communist activists by picketing government aided schools and shop selling English products⁵⁸. The confusion among the people, arising out of the communist strategy, would be clearer if we examine the Malda communists’ attempt to organize the silk- reelers (*basnis*) to support the war – effort of the government.

During the time of the Second World War the British Government was in dire necessity of Indian silk, because silk thread was essential for manufacturing of parachutes⁵⁹. When Britain was engaged in war with Japan, one of the foremost silk producing countries, the government was forced to buy from the reelers as much silk thread as possible⁶⁰. So in 1943, the Bengal Silk Control Order was passed in accordance with the Safety of India Act. By it, all the *basnis* (producer of silk- worm) and *ghaiwalas*(hand-reelers) were asked to sell all their cocoons to the government. The government’s fixed rates of the cocoons was rather low which displeased the *basnis* and *ghaiwalas*. The Act was however not strictly implemented in Malda up to 1944⁶¹.

The Deputy Controller of Silk at first tried to play a balance by satisfying both the interests of the *basnis* and the government. He assured the *basnis* that they would not sustain a loss if they sell their production to the government. However, his attempt did not succeed due to two reasons:

- a) The customers of silk from Jangipur offered the *basnis* higher rates and provoke them not to obey the government’s regulations;

- b) Some dishonest local merchants rendered the Act abortive by smuggling and hoarding of cocoons⁶².

As the repeated warnings of the Controller produced no result, the government in 1944 decided to modify the Act to make it more stringent. The Government declared that if anyone were found to possess cocoons without permit, he would be arrested and put to trial according to the Safety of India Act⁶³.

In such a situation, the local communists came forward to support the war-effort of the government. They held meetings at Sujapur, Milki and Kaliachak (the major silk-producing areas) with the reelers and weavers to show obedience to the Act and promised that they would try their best to persuade the government to increase the price of the 'koas' (Cocoons)⁶⁴.

At the initiative of the local Communist Party, a meeting was held at Sujapur between the *basnis* and the representatives of the district administration. Manik Jha, a noted communist leader and member of the District Board was present at the meeting⁶⁵. The Deputy Controller of Silk at first explained the gravity of the situation. In his speech, Manik Jha categorically declared Party's sympathy with this war-effort of the government. He told that:

- a) The *basnis* should help the war-effort of the government by selling their cocoons in their possession to the latter.
- b) Enough cocoons had been hoarded by dishonest merchants.
- c) Black marketers must be punished.
- d) The government should increase the price of the cocoons.
- e) An organization of the *basnis* would be formed under the guidance of Naren Chakraborty, the Secretary of the local Communist Party. The organization would look after interests of the *basnis*⁶⁶.

However, within a very short time the role of the communists were questioned by the *basnis*. The promise given by the communists were not fulfilled. The

price of cocoons did not increase. They started believing that these urban communists were acting as the agent of the government⁶⁷. At a conference of *basnis* at Sujapur the interference of the communists in their 'own affair' was resented by them. The endeavour of the local communists failed and smuggling and illegal hoarding of cocoons continued unabated⁶⁸. The editor of Gourdoot, a local pro-congress newspaper, was surprised by this rapid change of the situation. He was of the opinion that this sudden loss of communist credibility before the *basnis* was a matter too serious to be investigated by the party leadership⁶⁹.

Thus, the case of Malda clearly indicates that the mass people did not properly realize the party's strategy of supporting the war-effort of the government. The effort of the local communist party in identifying too much with the British Government created confusion among the people. It provided an opportunity for the District Congress to criticize the communists for joining the 'other side of the independence struggle'. Naren Chakraborty, the then Secretary of the local Communist Party, regretted that the congress leaders of Malda and their supporters misbehaved with the communists during the Quit India Movement, as they kept themselves aloof from it⁷⁰.

THE COMMUNISTS AND 1943 FAMINE

During 1943-44, Bengal was in the grip of a devastating famine. The famine was due not to the shortfall in production which had been small, but to hoarding, caused by popular panic and greed as well as government mismanagement⁷¹. Careful calculations suggest that there was more food in 1943 than in 1941 and thus it seems safe to conclude that the disastrous Bengal famine was not the reflection of a remarkable over shortage of food grains in Bengal⁷². In this sense, the famine was man-made.

The impact of the Bengal Famine of 1943 on Malda district was not as severe as in some other districts of North Bengal. In Malda, mortality rate was

relatively low⁷³. Mass suffering was nonetheless extensive and acute. A contemporary local newspaper of Malda depicted the misery of the common people in the district at the time of the famine of 1943. It reported that the rural areas were mainly hard- hit by the famine. The misery of the *malos* (Fishermen), agricultural labourers and workers engaged in silk weaving was beyond description. The district administration opened up some relief camp, but the measure was inadequate⁷⁴.

In such a situation, the local communists came forward to help the distressed people. The Krishak Sabha urged the district administration to bring the price-level under control, to open fair- price shops in different market places for the distribution of essential goods, to fix up prices of agricultural produce and to provide employment for the landless and helpless people⁷⁵. The communist opened up five relief camps in different parts of the district⁷⁶. The young communist volunteers in various parts of the district started relief work and at the same time launched agitations against black marketers and hoarders⁷⁷. All the mass fronts of the party, particularly the Krishak Sabha actively took part in this movement. Several Food Committees were formed throughout the district in which the communists took an active role. Ramendranath Mitra, a noted communist leader of Nababganj, was nominated as the Secretary of the Food Committee of Ramchandrapur. The Ramchandrapur Food Committee did a commendable job in organizing famine relief at Nababganj⁷⁸. Ramendranath Mitra later became the General Secretary of the Malda Zilla Krishak Sabha⁷⁹.

Therefore, the 1943 famine provided an occasion to CPI to redeem its position in Malda through sustained relief work among the poor peasants. An official report reveals that through such activities the communists and the Krishak Sabha were able to expand and strengthen their influence and support base in the district particularly at Barind and Nababganj and Nachol p.s.⁸⁰ CPI now changed its strategy of 'People's War' phase and gradually came out for peasant movements like Tanka or Tebhaga⁸¹.

CPI AND THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT IN MALDA.

The Tebhaga Movement (1946-47 and 1948-49) was a major peasant upheaval in Bengal (and West Bengal) in the twentieth century. The movement failed after tremendous sacrifices by sharecroppers and their allies, the landless labourers and petty artisans. However, it left a deep impression in the peasant psyche. The powerful impact of Tebhaga is clear from the fact that the ruling classes which came to power in the wake of the uprising in both the divided parts of Bengal were forced to make legal concession to the peasantry.

In September 1946, the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha executive had resolved to launch the Tebhaga agitation during the harvest season in the coming winter. The principal demand was for a two- thirds share of the crop for the *bargadar*/ one third for the landlords⁸². In fact, there had already been stirring from below before the BPKS formally gave the call in September 1946 for a Tebhaga agitation. The Land Revenue Commission, Bengal (popularly known as the Floud Commission) had recommended two thirds share of the crop for *bargadars* in 1940. The same year, the Krishak Sabha accepted Tebhaga as a matter of policy at its annual session at Panjia, but at subsequent sessions no further progress was made on the issue. At the Moubhag Conference, which was held a few months before the Tebhaga uprising broke out, there was no discussion on launching of the movement far less any measures to prepare the peasantry for the movement. Suguta Bose thinks that the decision of the Communist Party to align itself with the Tebhaga agitation stemmed from its national and international concerns wholly extraneous to agrarian questions in Bengal. It was an attempt by the Party to rehabilitate itself having alienated Indian public opinion because of wartime collaboration with the British and having met with a recent rebuff from the CPSU⁸³. M.Abdullah Rasul laments the utter weakness of the leadership to gauge and grasp the mood of the peasantry on the eve of such a big movement⁸⁴. It is quite evident from the records of the period that the leadership was totally unprepared for the nature of response of the demand they raised would evoke⁸⁵.

The revolt started in November 1946, at the northwestern tip of Dinajpur district at the border with Bihar and to the contiguous districts in North Bengal (Jalpaiguri, Malda, Rangpur) and to 24-parganas in south. Pockets of revolt also flared up in Jessore, Khulna and Mymensingh⁸⁶. The chief slogans were *tebhaga chai*-- a demand for two third share and *nij khamare dhan tolo*--urging the *adhiars* to take the paddy to their own houses instead of the jotedars' yards⁸⁷.

In Malda, the chief centers of the Tebhaga movement were Gajol, Old Malda, Habibpur, Bamongola and Nachol of Nababganj. In these areas the Krishak Sabha had a strong support base⁸⁸. Naren Das, himself an organizer of the Tebhaga movement in Malda, stated that the movement in Malda evoked much response from the tribal and Rajbansi *bargadars* of Barind region. It fact, the *santals* of Barind and Nachol were the most militant vanguard of the Tebhaga movement in Malda⁸⁹. Communist and Krishak Sabha activists like Naren Chakraborty, Manik Jha, Mihir Das, Joygopal Goswami, Deben Saha, Naren Das, Himanshu Bannerjee took active role in organizing the Tebhaga movement in Malda⁹⁰. The district administration took alarm and some criminal cases were instituted and "orders under Section 144 were issued to stop meetings of communists to incite aborigines particularly"⁹¹.

ORGANIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT.

A widespread and intense peasant movement like Tebhaga cannot be staged without proper organizational set up. The organizational set up depends on the leadership of the movement, its attitudes and methods of peasant orgznization, the emergence of grass roots leadership, and the role of volunteers, women, students and workers, as supporting factors⁹².

Asok Majumdar has shown that there were three types of leaders who organized the Tebhaga movement. First, the urban-based middle class provincial leaders of CPI and BPKS. They provide a general organizational sketch of the movement and supervise over the local leaders with regard to the programme and coordination of the movement. Bhowani Sen and Muzaffar Ahmed are good examples of this type of leadership. Below there

were three kinds of leaders : a) those urban leaders who coordinated movement in a few districts or one district, b) urban middle class leadership at the village level which stayed with the villagers and became a part of their life and thus organized their movement, and c) grass-roots leadership emerging from the ranks of rural peasants which played the key role in the movement⁹³.

If we apply this model in the Malda Tebhaga movement, we will find that Abani Lahiri who coordinated the movement in Malda and Dinajpur is an example of second type of leadership who maintained a link with provincial leaders like Muzaffar Ahmed and Bhowani Sen⁹⁴. Naren Chakraborty, Manik Jha, Naren Das, Romendranath Mitra, Joygopal Goswami and Himanshu Bannerjee were examples of second type of leadership. We have already discussed the role of Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty in organizing the communist and Krishak Sabha movement in Malda. Romendranath Mitra was born in a *joteder* family at the village of Ramchandrapur of Nababgang P.S. While studying in Calcutta, he came into contact with the Communist Party. Gopen Chakraborty and Jogen Sen, two leaders of the communist trade union movement, brought Ramendranath into the arena of labour movement. At the time of the 1943 Famine, Romendranath was the secretary of the Ballygang unit of the Communist Party. In 1944, he came back to Malda and took a leading role in organizing Hat Tola and Tebhaga movement at Nachol-Nababganj region⁹⁵. Naren Das, Joygopal Goswami and Himanshu Banerjee had also urban middle class background. Earlier they were associated with Anusilan Samiti⁹⁶. However, it was the grass roots leadership, which played the key role in the movement. In this category, we can mention Matla Majhi, Sagar Majhi, Sukhbilas Barman, Nakul Karmakar of Nachol P.S.⁹⁷ Bhubhan Deshi, Bebhul Deshi, Bhaga Deshi, Raghu Deshi, Dharani Sarkar and Ramu Santal of Gajol P.S.⁹⁸ In Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, these peasant leaders made possible a regular and lively functioning of the Tebhaga Committees at the village levels. This grass-roots leadership sustained the movement and helped it to become the greatest peasant movement in twentieth century Bengal⁹⁹. The middle class organizer maintained a regular contact with these community leaders. For example, during the Tebhaga agitations, Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty approached Dharani Sarkar, a

Rajbansi and Ramu Santal, to lead the struggle in Gajol. Similarly, when Romen Mitra went to Nachol, *santa*/ community leaders like Matla Majhi were contacted¹⁰⁰.

At the lowest level of the organization there were Tebhaga Committees of the Krishak Sabha and Volunteers. In Barind region of Malda, a number of Tebhaga Committees were formed which look after the day to day problems arising out of the peasant movement. However, the most effective weapon for the struggle was the Volunteer Force. They maintained communications with other villages, harvest paddy or carried the crop from the *jotedar*'s field or *kholan* to the *bargader*'s place and resisted police or the *jotedar*'s agents¹⁰¹.

PHASES OF THE MOVEMENT

In Malda, the Tebhaga movement was organized by local CPI and Krishak Sabha leaders from October 1946. In this phase, the most active Tebhaga activists were the *santals* of Barind who had a long history of struggle against the *zamindar- jotedar- mahajan*. In this phase the district administration was hesitant in coming out a firm policy. As the District Magistrate of Malda wrote that 'the communists were inciting the aborigines and we took immediate steps. Aboriginals being simple were incited by fake hopes of communists. I showed leniency to them. But the problem has reached provincial level now and government will have to take action for the whole province and declare their policy finally'¹⁰². He further stated that some criminal cases were instituted and orders under Section 144 were issued to stop meetings of communists to incite aborigines particularly¹⁰³.

During February 1947, the Tebhaga movement was intense in the Barind region of Malda, an area where sharecroppers had been active before. Activists had campaigned here, holding discussions on Tebhaga¹⁰⁴. They selected people to lead the movement, enroll members for the Krishak Sabha, raise volunteers and organize the movement. Slogans like *adhi nai, tebhaga chai, nij kholane dhan tolo, patit jami dakhali karo* etc. became very popular. *Ek bhai, ek taka, ek lathi*, became a major rallying slogan. It signified a militant peasant solidarity¹⁰⁵.

The most important task was to generate support for the movement through *baithaks*, meeting, assemblies, campaigns, *hat sabha*, and through literature and slogans. The urban party workers used to go to the various fairs and *hats* like Ramkeli fair, Kaismbazar fair of Bholahat, Nababganj *hat* and campaigned for Tebhaga shouting their demands. They also used to sell party pamphlets like '*Langal Jar Jami Tar*' of Bhowani Sen, '*Rush Biplob Chasir Larai*' of Somenath Lahiri at these hats and fairs¹⁰⁶.

Soon the agitation took the form of breaking into the landlords' *kholans* and taking away the sharecroppers' shares of the crops. The peasant activists asked the smaller landlords to compromise and several agreed to their demands including bearing the costs of carrying the paddy and giving receipts¹⁰⁷. The more adamant landlords retaliated by threatening arrests, eviction, stopping water and fuel supplies, bribing union and *panchayat chowkidars* to spread false rumours of arrest¹⁰⁸. The District Magistrate, convening, a meeting attempted to negotiate a settlement. However, the peasant activists did not attend the meeting for fear of arrest.

The *jotedars*, as an influential part of the social structure, met the local authorities frequently to enlist their help. The urban middle class was also suspicious as the peasant actions went directly against their economic interest¹⁰⁹. The police started to enter villages, though often in the face of strong peasant resistance. At Canot village in Gajol P.S., a police party arrested Bhupen Desi and others and was *gheraoed* by villagers who took away their warrants and uniforms. A landlord's servant was sent to the police station and armed police came to release the first group of constables. There were other similar instances of resistance. In another village in Old Malda peasants *gheraoed* a police force¹¹⁰.

The police now began to retaliate. Hundreds of peasant, particularly *santal* and *rajbansi* who were more militant, fled from the village. Police started to snatch paddy from *bargadar*'s *khamars* and took them to *jotedars*. Peasants were arrested under false charges, women were molested, houses were looted and destroyed¹¹¹.

After Independence, particularly in 1948, the movement in Malda began to take a different form. The basic difference between the CPI and ruling Congress Party became clear and the Congress attitude to CPI became hostile. More and more cases were instituted against peasant activists. The focus of the CPI line from 1948 onwards was an intensive peasant struggle taking the poor peasant as its main force. The Nachol P.S and the Barind region of Malda became two major centres of sharecroppers' struggle in Malda.

In this connection, we would like to mention here that Nachol went to East Pakistan in 1947 Partition because of the Radcliffe Award. However, the preparation and organization for Tebhaga movement in Nachol began before Independence and Partition. Ramendranath Mitra, Ila Mitra, Matla very Sardar, Phanibhushan Roy and SK Ajhar Hussain were the leaders of the Nachol movement who organized the *santal* and *rajbansi* peasants for the demand of Tebhaga¹¹². Therefore, in order to understand the dynamics of the Tebhaga movement in Malda, we would made a passing reference of the sharecroppers struggle in Nachol in the post-Independence phase.

In Nachol, the most organized areas were Chandipur, Kendua, Sibnagar, Golapara, Mallickpur, Kalupur and Mahipur¹¹³. Chandipur was the centre of the movement. The sharecroppers here were predominantly *santals* and had participated in the movement of Jitu Santal in the late 1920s and early 1930s. A small group of communists, led by Ramendranath Mitra and Ila Mitra, in conjunction with an influential *santa*/leader, Matla Sardar, led the campaign for tebhaga¹¹⁴. The movement gained considerable support. The *santal* sharecroppers harvested crops collectively over an area of five hundred *bigha* approximately. The activists printed leaflets, which were taken as legal documents by the sharecroppers authorizing the agitation. Initially on the Mitra estate, sharecroppers took the crops to their own *khamars*¹¹⁵. Many landlords accepted the tebhaga demand. An area of about twenty square miles, similar to a *tebhaga elaka*, was set up with village warning systems every two miles and armed peasant guards¹¹⁶.

The agitation for tebhaga at Nachol gradually became more violent. The movement had mass support from the *santal* sharecroppers. On 5 January 1950, a police party arrived at Ghasuda village of Nachol on receiving complain of crop *looting* from local *jotedars*. When they entered the village, the *santal* sharecroppers attacked them. Five police were killed¹¹⁷. Full-scale repression began soon after. Hundred of armed police entered the area, people were arrested, and houses were set ablaze. Cases were lodged against the peasants and communists on charges ranging from rioting and murder, to the overthrow of the government. Twenty-two people were beaten to death, many tortured and hundreds of peasants fled to India. It was said that the *santals* were so militant because of 'their old bitterness at losing land.' When the police were killed, it was asserted by a communist activist that, 'the movement went beyond our control'¹¹⁸.

In Malda also, the Tebhaga Movement did not end with Independence in 1947. In the Barind area of Malda, the local communists continued to organize agricultural labourers, poor peasants and sharecroppers around the demands of abolition of the zamindari system, tebhaga, better wages and redistribution of land¹¹⁹. Women cut crops to their own *khamar*. Landlords were gheraoed, their property *looted* and their agents beaten. People were rescued from the hands of the police and arms were snatched. The police retaliated by opening fire on the sharecroppers and several people were injured and killed for example, at Englishbazar and Basudebpur¹²⁰.

The role of women in Malda Tebhaga Movement was a significant factor. Like in Dinajpur, women activists led the attack on police and *jotedar*'s armed agents. They also joined in harvesting paddy, gave shelters to leaders, worked as couriers, gave the danger signal in villages¹²¹. At Bhawanikotha village of Gajol, women led attacks against the police to rescue peasants, who had been arrested. At Canot village of Gajol, a *nari bahini* was formed under the leadership of Pratima Roy, a rajbansi woman. Senior local leaders like Naren Chakraborty, Manik Jha, Kali Sarkar held *baithaks* of women activists of Gajol to explain to them the aims and objectives of the struggle¹²².

For rural poor women in general, as Peter Custers observes, the Tebhaga struggle had a deep emotional significance. When during the Tebhaga Movement paddy was stacked at their own threshing floor, women bowed with folded hands in front of the paddy. This-- the emotional upsurge regarding rice-- is not understood by urban man. Many women never saw unthreshed rice before in their lives. They thought that this (the stacking of rice) was a revolution¹²³.

Thus, it may be stated that Tebhaga had taken the form of a spontaneous movement in Malda along with other North Bengal districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri. However, the major weakness of the Tebhaga Movement in Malda was that the agitation flared in small pockets in the Barind region consisting of Gajol, Habibpur and Bamongola P.S. The movement, even at its height, remained in a state of isolation from most of the rural areas in the district. Apart from this, there was a general transformation in the political climate of the province in general and Malda district in particular. That Freedom with Partition was in the horizon overshadowed all other events. These factors, combined with massive state repression, contributed to the setback of sharecroppers' struggle¹²⁴. In the summer of 1947, the Krishak Sabha formally called off the Tebhaga agitation. The Communist Party sought to revive the movement in the harvest season of 1948- 49, but it was unable to repeat the performance of 1946-47¹²⁵. Nevertheless, the Tebhaga Movement of 1946-47 was unprecedented in extent and intensity as a sharecroppers' struggle. It contributed to increase the pressure on the government for abolition of the Zamindari System and gained recognition of the major political parties for the situation of the sharecroppers.

The first serious proposal for the abolition of the zamindari system was made in 1932 at a conference of the Bengal Provincial Praja Samity (later renamed as the Krishak Praja Party). The Krishak Praja Party contested the provincial elections of 1937 on the basis of its programme for the abolition of landlordism without compensation. The coalition ministry which was formed under the premiership of A. K. Fazlul Huq, the leader of the Krishak Praja Party, appointed a Commission to devise ways and means to replace the

Permanent Settlement 'by a more equitable system and laws suitable to the needs and requirements of the people'. The Commission recommended the abolition of landlordism with compensation, but this was not implemented.¹²⁶.

The demand was raised on several occasions later on, but no decision was taken. After the attainment of independence, the West Bengal Government took up the scheme of land reform. The West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act of 1953 abolished the estates created by the Permanent Settlement in 1793. This was virtually an agrarian revolution by legislation to benefit the rural poor. But the law was so framed as to admit of serious loopholes. Homestead, 15 acres of non-arable land, 25 acres of personal farm, fish tank orchards, tea gardens, land for poultry and animal husbandry, land for factory, building and structure and land consecrated to Gods were all exempt from the operation of the WBEA Act of 1953.

As a result, in Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, arable acres were overnight converted into fishponds and transferred in the name of household deities. Land alienation was most rampant in Malda through *benami* or collusive transfer. As 'family' was not clearly defined, the giant estates (as in the case of Chanchal Estate of Malda) were parcelled out to relatives, friends, servants and even the unborn in units legitimate under the land ceiling¹²⁷. To plug these loopholes, the government had to pass another act – the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955.

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