

Popular Protest Movements of Dinajpur in Post-Colonial Bengal and the Role of Left Political Parties: A Micro Level Study

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***Abstract:** The contemporary trend of Indian history writing is 'history from below'. It means a number of historians have focused on the writing of the history of marginalized people or the common people who are discarded from the arena of mainstream of history. Recently, an attempt has been made to write the history of marginalized people or marginalized areas. Dinajpur is such kind a District where galaxy of historical incidents took place but till now the scholars are hardly attempted to write the peoples' history of Dinajpur. After the end of World War II Bengal had to face a series of popular protest movements and Dinajpur was no exception to that. Primarily these movements were started by the then opposition parties i.e. left forces and it became spontaneous.¹ Even the ordinary people without any party affiliation joined these movements in great number and the District witnessed many protest movements in Colonial and of course Post-Colonial period.*

Dinajpur city was the first catalyst to create modern political organization, struggle and consciousness. Through this movement not only among the people of the city and middle class, the first formation of the people of districts started with the spirit of British imperialism. Among the followers of movement the subaltern, the middle class, small businessman, small and medium Jotedars, students, youth, women, shopkeepers and other also joined together.² During colonial period the Congress was dominated, but in few areas left political parties sprouted in Dinajpur. The leftists got instance there slowly and later in the post-colonial period they spread their influence over the whole of this district. The present paper will throw light on popular protest movements of Dinajpur from 1946 to 1977 through which the Left Political Parties thrived in Dinajpur.

Dinajpur is well-known for its historical importance. The district lies between 26°29'54" and 25°10'55" north latitudes, and between 89°0'30" and 87°48'37" east longitudes in the Jalpaiguri Division of West Bengal.³ The inhabitants of the district are mostly comprised Rajbansi, Santal, Oran, Pahan, Munda and the Muslims. Apart from this among the zamindars and landlords mostly were Hindu businessmen coming from different districts.⁴ These people living on the low level of the society became impellent due to oppression of the colonial rulers and exploitation of the zamindars and landlords.

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During colonial oppression Dinajpur had these circumstances to scotch it always left politics began appearing with all its assertive ideological stands.

The concept of Left Politics is a complex issue. India has the first Communist Party (CPI), second Communist Party (CPIM), and even the third Communist Party (CPIM-L) which is known as '*Communist Left*'. Side by side with these the other Socialist Parties too began claiming to be leftist. But it would be logical to term them as '*Non-Communist Left*'. According to Prof. Debi Chatterjee, "*From one communist party, first two, then three and now a multiplicity of communist parties and groups- all claim a 'left' status. Not only the Marxists, but also the socialists of different shades consider themselves as 'left'. There was a time in history when even the congress, led by Indira Gandhi, was known as the 'left' Congress. While all these and many more claim 'left' status, many of them have difficulties in establishing their credentials before others. Thus one Marxist Party refuses to recognize another as 'left', and in fact, most go to the extent of considering itself and only itself as genuinely left*".⁵ These left parties believed the cause of equality and social justice against undue social privilege. In all spheres, left parties demands that citizens must enjoy equality in the eyes of law, basic human freedom, full trade union rights and liquidation of feudalism in the countryside.⁶

During the colonial days among the leftist parties only Communist Party of India spread its influence in different areas of Dinajpur. However, in the Balurghat Sub-division of this district Revolutionary Socialist Party had its influence to some extent.⁷ In the Goalpokhar Thana area Forward Bloc had some influence and in Raiganj Thana area Socialist party had showed their seed and till today they exist in some of villages of Raiganj. From 1937 the movements tended to be anti-congress and pro-leftist. For this the failure of Nishith nath Kundu, the undisputed leader of Dinajpur, to get ticket from Congress to participate in the Assembly Election was responsible. He later stood as Independent Candidate and won with the active support of leftists and became M.L.A. from Dinajpur.⁸ After this victory he used to draw attention to the deprivation of the people of Dinajpur in the Assembly. Side by side with this, prominent leftist leaders like Muzaffar Ahmed, Bankim Mukherjee. Panchugopal Bhaduri and Biswanath Mukherjee came to Dinajpur in 1938 to encourage the leftists.⁹ In post-colonial period we found Socialist Party (1948), Praja Socialist Party (1952), Sanjukta Socialist Party (1964).

The people of Dinajpur were carrying out a great tradition of the movements since the very inception of colonial rule. From the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Movement of Civil Disobedience and the Revolutionary Movement of the fire age Dinajpur gets an extra mileage.¹⁰ Right before the independence and in the post-independence era the movements through which the leftists would extend their area of influence were *Tebhaga Movement, Movement against Levy, movement against the eviction of bargadar, Bengal-Bihar Merger Movement, Food Movement, Peasant and Labour Movement, Teachers' Movement, Refugee Movement, Movement against Emergency etc.*¹¹ In these movements the participation of increasing number of

leftists augmented the acceptability of leftism to peasants, labourers and common people. Consequently, the leftists began consolidating their position in the district of Dinajpur.

In the undivided Bengal in the Dinajpur district the immortal struggle of Tebhaga by the peasants was an important phase. From 1946 both Communist Party and Kisan Sabha called for a struggle of Tebhaga. In the month of October 1946 the District Committee of the Communist party started agitation with three watchwords namely harvest paddy for one's own granary, no adhis we want tebhaga and no interest against borrowed paddy.¹² In the planning of this movement the whole district was divided into six regions.¹³ These were....1) Thakurgaon East Region under the leadership of Bibhuti Guha and Ajit Roy, 2) Thakurgaon Western Region under the leadership of Janardan Bhattacharyya, 3) Chiri Region under the leadership of Sudhir Samajpati and Sachendu Chakraborty, 4) Phulbari and Patiram Region under the leadership of Rupnarayan Roy and Kali Sarkar, 5) Chopra Region under the leadership of Dr. Bhaben Singh and Adhir Biswas, 6) Balurghat Region under the leadership of Sunil Sen. The agitators had the main demand of bringing the jotedars to agree to have a share of the crop out of the three parts. The peasants did not agree to give even the half of the share to the jotedars and they claimed for collecting the whole of the crop to be preserved in the storehouse of the peasants only and if ever any share distribution was to be done in the farmhouse of the peasants only. But jotedars offered this agreement that land was theirs, seeds and fertilizers were also given by them and so they will not agree to this system of share distribution. Naturally, conflict arose between the forces of jotedars and peasants. On 4th January 1947, in the port of Chiri of Dinajpur Shibram Majhi and Samiruddin Mian were shot by police to death. These two men became the first martyrs of the Tebhaga movement of Dinajpur as well as Bengal. Bengal Provincial Krisak Sabha reported that in the Tebhaga movement of Dinajpur 40 agitators were killed, 1200 arrested, 10000 wounded and 65 policemen also wounded. A worth mentioning aspect of this movement in Dinajpur is that many Muslim peasants joined different meetings and processions with the flag of Muslim League and Koran.¹⁴ On 19th march 1947, The Statesman wrote *she had been dumb for centuries, today that speechless being has become voluble with one shout of a slogan, he is now marching forward crossing big fields growing grass or lying follow with grass only on it. Everybody of these suddenly enlightened men had rifle perched on his shoulder while the procession was red flag held in the hands of the front liners. Simply this is inspiring an event to make a revolution successful. Really a chill of fear goes down our spines when they are seen lunging one another and addressing 'comrade' while chanting loudly 'inquilab'*.¹⁵ It would not be an exaggeration that as a result of this Tebhaga movement Land Acquisition Act, Land Reforms Act etc. have been legislated. Beside this, this movement led the nation to freedom in the villages many step ahead. It deserves mentioning here that the massive popularity of this movement helped a lot in bringing victory to the poor peasant Rupnarayan Roy from Dinajpur Constituency as M.L.A. in the Provincial Assembly Election in 1946.¹⁶

From 1953 the Krishak Sabha started protesting vehemently under the leadership of Communist Party when Levi system was imposed upon paddy crop cultivated by poor peasants. The Sabha started signature campaign from the masses and sent it to the then Chief Minister. The members of Krishak Sabha from such places as Balurghat, Patiram, Kantabari, Bikhahar, Itahar, Maharajahat, Bhatol, Bindol etc. of Dinajpur would organize mass movements successfully to make the protest tremendously fruitful.¹⁷

After independence people of Dinajpur felt a limitless hope for a bright day ahead. Meanwhile Radcliffe lunged a knife right away through the breast them and in protest against this injustice the leftists essayed a few songs. A sample of these songs is given hereunder.¹⁸

*“Ogo ponorai August/ ki bole aaj gaibo tumar gaan
Radcliffe churi khana/ elo tere dilo hana
Mayer booke hanlo churi/ korle tare khan khan....”
(In Bengali)*

*(O fifteenth August/ what shall we say to sing your arrival
Radcliffe's knife/ came darting to us
Pierced my mother's breast/ and it into many parts)
(English Translation)*

This song was written by Kamal Roy and set to tune by Himangshu Majumdar. At this time the refugees shrieked and aloud for food in huge numbers. To help them at the initiative of RSP an All Party Committee was formed. This committee consisted of Parsh Neogi and Jamini Majumdar from CPI, Probodh Talapatra and Khagen Dey from RSP, Kamalendu Chakraborty from Congress and others. This committee arranged supplies of rice and pulse for them and appraised the administration of the need of quick relief to the refugees.¹⁹

In 1956 Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal and Sri Krishna Singh, the then Chief Minister of Bihar began endeavouring to unite both the states into one single whole. To protest against this effort the whole of Bengal rose up in unison. At that time Dinajpur District was not an exception too in this respect. Mainly in the Sub-division of Balurghat and Raiganj the movement became terribly powerful. In the Raiganj Sub-division in this movement Communist Party, Praja Socialist Party and other leftist parties took part with tremendous alacrity. At the District level anti-merger movement got the leadership of Dhiren Banerjee of RSP and Jamini Majumdar of CPI. Especially the movement raging in the Raiganj Sub-division was influenced by the personality and fame of Nishitnath Kundu. At the call of agitators a day was observed as *Arandhan*.²⁰ Many youth and students participated in this movement. From this time onwards the allied student-youth movement began tarring a definite and permanent form in this District. Just after anti-merger movement of 1956, the election to the State

Assembly of 1957 was held. In this election Dhiren Banerjee won the Balurghat Seat as a candidate of RSP. After this victory the leftist got the scope of consolidating their position with increasing power.²¹

From 1959 to 1966 Bengal was in the terrific grip of a food shortage. In demand for the food the agitation in Bengal came to heard everywhere. This historic Food Movement had socio-economic perspective. By utilizing different loopholes in the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, feudal lords began to keep their holding intact by way of deluding the government. The Land which was redundant remained fallow for longtime affecting total harvest. This meant that they had not to pay a huge amount of tax against the quantity of lands that they owned. Along with this the rate of agricultural growth also began to go down. The Government used to levy a quantity of tax on the husking mills. But the owners of these mills did not pay these taxes. According to Saibal Mitra, the student leader, the Food Movement took a tremendously violent turn because of the feudalistic agricultural politics of the congress led Government under the leadership of Prafulla Sen. Apart from this, a huge quantity of rice continued to be illegally passed over to the erstwhile East Pakistan in collusion with the police. Apart from this subsequent to the Indo-Pak War the prices of the essential commodity shot up to go beyond the reach of ordinary buyers.²²Police started lathi charge and firing on the agitators indiscriminately. This agitation snowballed gradually in Raiganj, Kaliyaganj, Itahar, Balurghat etc. extensively. In this protest movement the leftist quickly formed the *Food Campaign Committee, Committee for Resistance to Price Rise, or Committee for Resistance to Famine*. These committees mainly aimed at lending solid support to the overall statewide leftist movement. Leaders like Manas Roy of Communist Party, Sukumar Guha of Forward Bloc, Mukul Bose & Dhiren Banerjee of RSP and Nishitnath Kundu proclaimed the leadership in this movement.²³

The movements of the Teachers and Labourers were worth mentioning stage in the rapid and steady spread of the leftist movement in Dinajpur. In the fifties and sixties the teachers and labourers movement got an unprecedented impetus in the whole of West Bengal from the extensive awakening of people here to the terrific problems stalking this state. From 1954 the Primary and Secondary Schools got the impulse of the huge waves of statewide leftist movement. Cease work and fasting started at the initiative of *All Bengal Teachers' Association (ABTA)* on the issues of different demands of the teachers in Raiganj Sub-division. These were led by Sudhir Ghosh, Subir Dey, Binoy Biswas, Sabita Majumder, Puspa Chakraborty and others. In 1966 teachers of this Sub-division observed 27 days cease work in all the schools under the leadership of ABTA. In seventies in response to the call of *West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association (WBCUTA)*, the teachers of Raiganj University College observed 20 days cease work. It deserves to be mentioned that in Dinajpur this had been the first movement by the College teachers. Side by side the teachers movement the first labour strike started by the leftist in Dinajpur with the participation of the labourers of the North Bengal State Transport Corporation (NBSTC). Manas Roy and Janaranjan Chattopadhyay played a

very important role that merits mention here in lending effectively to this movement. ABTA made the labourers, employees and teachers organizations entirely movement-oriented. In 1967, Sahadeb Yadav and Shyam Chakraborty set up *West Dinajpur Jute Bailing and Processing Workers' Union*. During this time *12 July Committee* too extended its sphere of influence by opening a branch of it in Dinajpur.²⁴ The time under discussion had noticed that all movements more or less were led by the collective directions given by 12 July Committee.

The year 1967 was significant in the history of West Bengal. It was in this year the leftist came to occupy the corridor of power for a brief period of time. The veteran CPIM leader Mr. Jyoti Basu took oath as Deputy Chief Minister in the Ministry of Mr. Ajoy Mukherjee. From Dinajpur Mr. Nishitnath Kundu was picked up to become Minister for Relief and Co-operatives. Meanwhile the Naxalites began to move the government in their own style and that de-established it within a very short period of time. The Naxalites although stuck to this armed aggression on the constitutional Government non-stop the violent ferment in Marxist-Leninist fashion could not prove its durability in the teeth of official resistance of the Indian State. Consequent upon the stubborn opposition through violent means of the Naxalites to anything offered by the polity of India Governor Dharamveer dismantled the United front Ministry on 21st November in 1967. This entailed a long and sustained protest movements of the leftists started to burst out everywhere in West Bengal. In Dinajpur too these movements spread far and aside.²⁵

The time spreading from 1972 to 1977 was really propitious for the leftist movement. Following on the heels of the Bangladesh Republic coming into being under the leadership of Seikh Mujibur Rahaman numberless refugees took shelter in the three Sub-divisions of Dinajpur i.e. Balurghat, Raiganj and Islampur. The leftist parties extended their helping hands to all these refugees. Many of Congress party came out to help the refugees. The later years many of these refugees inclined to the leftism. But then to call meeting and set up associations were next to impossible till 1972-1977. In despite of the Government's resistance, however, the leftists did not stop from reaching different remote parts of this District with their progressive cultural message.²⁶ Fortunately for the struggling leftists all these efforts of them to be popular among the masses resulted ultimately in their massive victory in 1977 in the Assembly Election.

In conclusion, it may be said that the popular movements in Dinajpur were important and memorable in history, many people were arrested by joining in the various movement, sometimes they were wounded and some time they died too while upholding the banner of their struggle. Most importantly, the existence of British rule was impossible due to mass movement. And in case of leftist it may be summed up that in colonial period the politics of leftism began but it was in embryonic stage. In reality in the post-colonial era the leftist thinking began to get booster more and more due to gradual slackening of the harm handed rule of the foreign power. labourers, peasants and

common people chanted the slogan for right to equality and end of feudalism and depending on these slogans leftists proceeded onward to their goal. Specialty of the leftism of West Bengal is that a faction of Congress discreetly defected from their mother party and joined the leftists which only helped the leftist either in striking its roots in this District more deeply and infallibly signaling that in future the leftists were to loom large in the horizon with tremendously feeling effect but as a set off to this phenomenon the rightist conservatives just lazed away time by patronizing the jotedars and zaminders remaining always their alienation from the mainstream psyche. This was a meager opportunity for the leftists at first who right away usurped the last rays of shine of the rightists and won a walkover to be predominant as a promising political force for the state as a whole.

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