

LAND REFORMS, AGITATIONS, TENSIONS, IN MALDA AND WEST DINAJPUR: TEBHAGA TO NAXALBARI

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Abstract: Land is one of the most important factors for people's daily life. From pre-independence to post-independence period land played a crucial role. Through the hands of land, political parties strengthen their footsteps in the socio-political life of Bengal. Land reform is one of the key factors for the life of the common people of North Bengal especially Malda and West Dinajpur. In the colonial period land became a tug of war between zamindar-jotdar and peasant-share cropper. In many cases land became a centre of tension and insurrection. Frequent organized revolts took place over the issue of land and land related matters. Tebhaga Movement of 1946 and the Naxalbari incident of 1967 dwindled under the groan of partition of India and the aftermath of refugee crisis. The marginalized peasants and tenants whose cause was exposed by the Tebhaga found themselves in a new situation after the abolition of zamindari system. The introduction of land ceiling which, through increased the quantity of vested land under the Government, yet owing to the want of law and Government decision to distribute vested lands among the landless peasants and agrarian labourers the poverty-stricken peoples' condition remained unchanged devoid of any improvement. By the hand of land it is found that rural society had undergone changes due to the growth of urbanization. Later land turned into a political issue of the political parties. Political parties' ideologies gradually changed with the passing of time on the issue of land. Tebhaga, Naxalbari Movement, formation of United Front Government in 1967, coming of Left Front Government in 1977, implementation of Operation Barga, these changes gradually took a concrete shape in the rural society. North Bengal's economic outlook, peoples motivation changed and in the cultural spheres, a new dimension is clearly discernible.

Key Words: Tebhaga, Naxalbari, Zamindars, Share-cropper, Raiyat, Communist, Bhatia, Operation Barga

1. INTRODUCTION:

The relation between land and people is interlinked with each other. 'langol jar jami tar' (he one who owns the plough, is the owner of the land) - this was the concept of Vedic land system.¹ From the Maurya, the Gupta and to the mediaeval age, land related rights developed in various aspects. In the Mughal period seven types of Tenancy rights were found khud-kast, pahi-kast, share-cropping, mujarian, kaljana, wakf and debotter (tax-free), and paiki praja.² In the Mughal period several vast wakf estate were found. Bais-Hazari wakf of Malda was an important estate.³ In the Mughal period revenue minister Todarmal played a significant role. Akbar proclaimed the following 'jumma' in Bengal province through Todarmal in 1582⁴-

Khas land - Rs.63, 44,260/

Jagir land - Rs.43, 48,892/

Total - Rs.1, 06, 93,152/

In the mediaeval period Indian land revenue and economic system were totally dominated by the feudal system. In the Mughal period new feudal were called *jaigirdar*. During the time of Jahangir, *jaigirdars* became powerful. In 1695, peasants protested against Sobha Singh for the collection of illegal taxes from the uncultivated land.⁵ The system of revenue collection in force against the Muhammadan conquerors of Bengal appears to have been to appoint farmers of the revenue for larger or smaller areas, as might be convenient. Revenue administration was however very lax and little attempt was made to insist on the punctual payment of the land tax, which no doubt frequently fell into arrears. The farmers of the revenue appointed by the Afghan rulers of Gour and after them, by the Mughals were in many instances the hereditary, land owners, who remained in undisturbed possession of their estates and free in a great measure from interference, on condition of paying a reasonable tribute. In the Mughal period the last revenue settlement took place in Bengal in 1722. At that time Bengal's *Subedar* was Murshid Quli Khan and the Sultan of Delhi was Sultan Muhammad Shah. During this time of survey and settlement, Bengal was divided into 13 chakla and 1600 parganas.⁶ This survey and settlement came to be known as *Jama-I Kamil-Tumar*. In this survey revenue rates were increased. At that time land revenue system of Bengal was in turmoil. During this time income of revenue collection gradually decreased because due to increase of jaigir land. For this reason military force and administration depended on the basis of revenue which came from different regions. During the reign of Murshid Quli Khan this economic disorder gradually became disciplined.

From Mughal period Britishers came in a little way. After the victory of the battle of Plassey (1757), they hold their dominance in the field of trade and commerce. They also maintained supremacy in the case of land. After the

Grant of Dewani (1765) English East India Company holds their dominance in a strong base. Clive got the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and now land revenue and survey settlement were under the hands of East India Company's monopoly.⁷ After the comings of the Englishmen, land actually came under the possession of the Company which consolidated their positions by ⁸-i) collection of revenues from the raiyat ii) settlement of wastage land iii) collection of local tax and fine for penalty. After the Grant of Dewani, Company done lot of experiment in which way more revenue could be earned from land. Warren Hastings first initiated this policy. He created a land mark in the history of land reforms in India. Hastings introduced a five years (1772-77) experiment of farming which came to be known as 'quin-quoennial settlement'.⁹ The 'quin- quoennial settlement' was in its operation the most grievous and unjust, even more so than the settlement of Mir Qasim ever was. Later Hastings was interested in life time settlement with the zamindars.¹⁰

In the meantime Hastings was replaced by Lord Cornwallis. He was the pioneer of land revenue system. Cornwallis wanted to set up a system and fixed the revenue demand from land. His policy was approved by the home authorities, and the decennial settlement was proclaimed on 22nd March, 1793 to have been fixed in perpetuity.¹¹ Cornwallis supported the zamindari system. Actually decennial settlement later known as permanent settlement created capitalist social structure in Bengal and promoted capitalism in agriculture. Later its fragrance gradually faded away.¹² Apart from these it created lot of problem among the peasants and cultivators.

Several Acts were passed for the protection of the raiyats. Bengal Rent Act of 1859 and Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 gave some reliefs. Zamindar's power decreased.¹³ But in reality most of these Acts gave us fruitless result. Actually the pressure of land revenue continues by the hands of zamindar, jotdar and British Government.¹⁴ Following census report give us detailed picture that in which way peasants were became land less –

Table No. 1. Census Report of 1921 and 1931

| | Census of 1921 | Census of 1931 |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| Zamindar and revenue receiver | 3,90,562 | 6,33,834 |
| Land owners who were engaged in cultivation and raiyat | 92,73,924 | 60,79,727 |
| Agricultural labours | 18,05,502 | 27,18,939 |
| Source: Animesh Dastidar, Operation Barga o Bhumi Sanskar, Anustup Prakashani, Kolkata, 1981, p.12 | | |

In 1938 Fazlul Haque government appointed a land revenue commission under the guidance of Sir Francis Floud.¹⁵ The commission presents a detailed report (1940) and mentioned that zamindari system has no merit. A big turmoil started about the report of Floud Commission. So by the end of the Second World War in 1945, The Bengal Administration Enquiry Committee (BAEC) was appointed. The BAEC agreed with the opinion of Floud Commission.

Actually from 1940-47 lot of incident took place. Polarizations of Hindu-Muslim relationships, bitter political crisis, break out of Second World War, famine, communal tension and political instability could not implement the Floud Commission Report. On the contrary, 1946-47, a mass movement started in entire North Bengal.¹⁶ This movement came to be known as Tebhaga Movement. Tebhaga means two-third. This was a movement which was organized against the British Government, police, zamindar and jotdar. Tebhaga Movement spread throughout North Bengal especially Malda and Dinajpur. It rapidly spread among peasants, cultivators and adihars (share-croppers). Share cropping is commonly understood as production in which the land holder and his tenant share the crop raised by the later on the farmer's land on a half and half basis. The seed of Tebhaga Movement lies in the share-cropping between the land holder and tenant.

In 1940 the question of the proposal of Tebhaga was taken in Jossore in the fourth conference of the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha (BPKS).¹⁷ In 1946 Tebhaga Movement took a violent shape. Peasant and cultivator's claimed the demand of two-third of the production of crops. Apart from these *hattola* and *abwab* encouraged the Tebhaga Movement. The movement spread in the United Provinces of twenty six Districts and it look a shape of mass movement in North East South Bengal's thirteen districts.¹⁸

Before discussing the Tebhaga Movement it is pertinent to say that in the pre- independence period Communist party and Krishak Sabha worked together in the police station of Old Malda, Englishbazar, Gazole and Kharra. Leading roles were played by Niren Chakrabarty, Manik Jha, Khitis Das, Rambrahma Lahiri and other leaders.¹⁹ In the last quarter of 1946 and in the February of 1947, Tebhaga Movement got a new momentum in the Barind region of Malda.²⁰ Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha (BPKS) took the final decision. Volunteers organized and they raised the slogan '*adhi noi Tebhaga chai*'. British Government, mahajan and jotdars started oppression against Tebhaga leaders and 144 Rule was imposed. Leaders like Niren Chakraborty, Mihir Das, Jiten Sharma, Dharani Sarkar, Raghu Desai and others were under the bad book of government.²¹ Arrest warrant was issued by their names.²² Communist leaders organized the cultivators in the fair and hats of villages like Ramkeli fair, Bhola hat, Kashimbazar hat and Nawabganj

hat.²³ Female's participation in the Tebhaga Movement was very interesting. Peter Custers drew a clear picture about this.²⁴

To subdue the Tebhaga Movement Malda district administration took some draconian steps. To cancel the meeting and conference of the Communist leaders, government implemented 144 Rule.²⁵ Small zamindars made settlement with the organizer for the Tebhaga Movement and they (cultivators) agreed to maintain about government norms of proper rate of crops and their revenue receipts. But on the other hand zamindar and jotdars appointed lathials to suppress the movement. These servants of zamindar and jotdar frequently attacked the houses of cultivators and set fire. In the last quarter of 1947 police started firing the peasants in Englishbazar and Basudevpur.²⁶ Many peasants were died by this firing.

In West Dinajpur Tebhaga Movement took a violent shape. Rajbanshi, Santhal, Orawn, Munda and Muslims took part in this agitation.²⁷ Female volunteers, especially Namasudra and Rajbanshi were very much enthusiastic. In 1946 united peasants and cultivators organized and they raised the slogan of Tebhaga in West Dinajpur. Actually Tebhaga Movement spread throughout the Dinajpur district. The Tebhaga Movement spread throughout the Dinajpur districts and divided into six regions.²⁸ (Thakurgaon, Setabganj, Chirirbandar, Itahar, Phulbari and Patiram) Tebhaga Movement took a violent shape in 1946. Charu Majumder, Jyoti Basu, Rupnarayan Roy, Ratanlal Brahman organized the peasants.²⁹ Volunteers raised the slogan³⁰

“ *Nal Baran Janda*
Ragni(agni) Baran Kaida
A Bharat Karte Swadhin
Sabai Mile Aga”

(March forward all to liberate India with a Red Flag and a flaming scythe in hand)

In 1947 'Kholan Bhanga Movement' started in Patiram and in 12th February on that year, Thakur Estate of Patiram and the rice stack of Lakshmi chakrabarty were attacked by the peasants.³¹ On that situation police came but they were besieged by the volunteers. In Patiram there were big gatherings; and many leaders took part in it such as Khoka Barman, Gulu Kabiraj, Paben Barman, Gostha Bihari Sarkar and Mongla Murmu. Actually Kholan Bhanga movement was one of the extended parts of Tebhaga Movement.³²

The chief centre of the Tebhaga movement was Khapur (present Dakshin Dinajpur). In 1947, 20th February, it was a day of terror in Khapur village.³³ In this village the zamindars under the leadership of Asit Mohan Singh resisted the movement. The police arrested the local leaders on February, 20. But the peasants threw barricade on the way and demanded the release of their leaders. Thousands of peasants were gathered.³⁴ In the mean time, police started firing, as a result of which 15 peasants including one woman were killed on the spot and several peasants were injured and very soon the death toll rose to 22.³⁵ The first martyr of Tebhaga Movement was Samiruddin and Sibram.³⁶ Some police persons were also injured in this peasant-police violence. At that time District Magistrate of Balurghat Sub-division was Panaullah and *Daroga* of the Balurghat police station was Phani Pathak.³⁷ British police got the support of the administration. Jotdar and zamindar also joined hand in this venture.

Apart from these, Patiram, Khapur, Nazirpur, Balurghat all these regions were dominated by the Tebhaga leaders. The most popular slogan of the peasant masses was '*Nij kholane dhan tolo*' (take paddy to your own threshing floor) Keeping pace with the progress of the movement police oppression increased. In numerous places agitating peasants came into conflict with the police who intervened to protect the interest of the jotdars and the zamindars. According to government records in 1947, 20th February, Police firing continued to 121 round and in this police-peasant violence 22 peasants lost their life.³⁸

Several historians and scholars have given their views and opinions from different angles about the nature, and the role of Krishak Sabha and as well as the Communist leaders of Tebhaga Movement.³⁹ There were lot of writings in different journals including thesis which have been published by different scholars and writers.⁴⁰ Andre Beteille, Binoy Bhusan Chowdhury, Ganabrata Bhattacharya, Adriane Cooper expressed their views. In many cases their views were contradictory with each other.

After independence West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act of 1953 was passed; its implementation began from 1955; and then there came the West Bengal Land Reforms Act.⁴¹ The zamindari system and the jotdari system were done with; and the amount of lands possessed by zamindars or jotdars were brought under ceiling. By the WBLR Act a large number of jots all over Bengal were declared excess; but all excess lands were not brought under government possessions. But the law was so framed as to admit of serious loopholes. More over even the declared lands were not distributed among the landless people. The jotdars possessed the excess arable lands by different ways.⁴² 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 exempted from the operation of the WBEA Act of 1953.⁴³

Table No. 1.1 (Land Reforms of West Bengal)

| LAND REFORMS IN WEST BENGAL AT A GLANCE | | |
|---|-----------------|---------------|
| | Upto March,1995 | Upto Dec,1995 |

| | | |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| Total land vested | 28.70 lac acre | 28.82 lac acre |
| Agricultural land vested | 12.71 lac acre | 12.80 lac acre |
| Distribution of vested land | 9.51 lac acre | 9.82 lac acre |
| Total number of assignees of vested land | 20.97 lac acre | 22.71 lac |
| Share croppers recorded | 14.64 lac | 14.66 lac |
| Homestead beneficiaries | 2.70 lac | 2.71 lac |
| Source: Benoy Krishna Chowdhury, Land Reforms in West Bengal, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 1996, p.5 | | |

The work of land records over ceiling and distribution among the landless actually started from 1967 by the State Government. According to the director of land records and survey, West Bengal, it is not possible to say the exact quantities of lands vested before August, 1967.⁴⁴ In the 1960's a debate was going on between the two leftist parties CPI and CPI (M) as to the question of parliamentary policy. Actually Naxalbari Movement created a difference about the ideology of the Communist party.⁴⁵ North Bengal became well known by the incident of Naxalbari Movement. In 1967, 25th May, Naxalbari Movement became organized. Meanwhile police inspector Sonam Wangdi lost his life by the hands of the peasants.⁴⁶ Actual grievance was that in Naxalbari area, there were no land reform and land distribution so far. Peasants were organized against the oppression of jotdars. Bhatia people organized the Naxalbari Movement. Peasants gathered in Prasudu joth on 25th May, 1967.⁴⁷ Female volunteers also protested. By the firing of police six protesters were died.⁴⁸

On 11th November, 1967 Charu Majumder, Saroj Dutta, Sushital Roy Chowdhury, Saibal Mitra, Nimai Ghosh were gathered in monumental field and they supported the movement.⁴⁹ Naxalbari Movement raised the slogan of "Agricultural Revolution".⁵⁰ By the issue of Naxalbari incident party was divided into two sections.⁵¹ The inner party struggle within the CPI and the CPI (M) by tracing the intellectual evolution of Maoism as a critique of revisionism from within the Indian Communist Movement. Many leaders came out from the party and they formed a new party in 1969 which came to be known as CPI (ML). Veteran CPM leader Harekrishna Konar strongly criticized the Naxal policies.⁵² It can be said that regarding the immediate tasks among the peasantry, the radicals gave stress on organizing militant movements for the ownership of land. They particularly showed concern for the task of organizing the rural labourers like *khetmajur* and *dinmajur* (day labourer) into their own unions which would be act as the backbone of the Krishak Sabha; the later was to be formed with the expanded masses of exploited peasantry. They got the sympathy of the peasants.⁵³ The First and Second United Front Governments were respectively formed in 1967 and 1969. In these periods (1967-69) Left Front co-sharers or part-owners were capturing lands throughout West Bengal.⁵⁴ After independence, in 1967 excess lands of jotdars and mahajans were captured.⁵⁵ This was the main goal of peasant agitation.

From Tebhaga to Naxalbari there were 20 years gap. But both these movement related with land rights and reforms. Tebhaga almost covered most parts of North Bengal but Naxalbari Movement especially scattered in northern parts of North Bengal but had little effects in Malda and West Dinajpur. These two districts were not affected so much but some sporadic incident took place. In Malda's Habibpur and Bamongola region, Naxal leader Narayan Sarkar organized the peasants.⁵⁶ In Islampur, Swadesh Sen was a leader of Naxal movement. Previously Swadesh Sen and Panchkari Mondal demanded for the inclusion of Islampur with West Bengal.⁵⁷ Itahar was one of the important centers of Naxal activities. At that time students were attracted most by the Naxal ideology. In Boaldar village (present Dakshin Dinajpur) two rifles were seized from the house of Dulu Ray and Gangadhar Ray. Rifles were found from the *Harang* (cow house).⁵⁸ In Malda and West Dinajpur there were many leaflets and booklets, but due to police raids many of the records were burnt by the leaders.

Naxal ideology created lot of questions in the party, the Central Committee did not support this movement. Lack of organization, disunity among the leaders, failure in identifying the class economy, feudal structure of the village society and set back in some other fronts sealed the movement to be failure; even after the seventy years of independence the radical change of the village society could not possible.⁵⁹ The failure of the movement has raised a doubt about the applicability of Marxism in the Indian socio-economic and political context.

2. CONCLUSION:

Tebhaga and Naxalbari Movement led the foundation of land reforms. A broad peasant unity flourished from Tebhaga to Naxalbari. Though these peasant movement represented two different views. By the hands of these two movements rural society of North Bengal gradually started changing with the passing of time. Leftist Government came into power in 1977.⁶⁰ Later then Leftist Government implemented Operation Barga in 1978 which created new history among the landless peasants. Many bargadars and cultivators got land for cultivation. By the hands of land reforms, rural society of North Bengal changed in different ways. Tebhaga was first established the rights of peasants and Naxalbari capitalized that situation in different ways.⁶¹ Naxalbari completed the fifty years (1967-2017). But the present land structure, reform and its related movement have been changed with the passing of time.

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