

## ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND OF TEBHAGA MOVEMENT IN BENGAL (1946-1950)

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### ABSTRACT

*The Tebhaga Movement of 1946-1950 was an intense peasant movement in the history of India. It was a fierce peasant uprising on the eve of India's independence and the partition of Bengal. Bengal has a history of rural resistance, throughout the whole period of colonial rule. The Tebhaga uprising in many ways was the culminating point, spreading over large areas of the countryside and expressing the urge of laboring men and women to be liberated from exploitation. Sixty lakh people participated in the Tebhaga movement at its peak. The issue around which the campaign was launched was economic. In September 1946, less than a year before the partition of Bengal by the British, the provincial Kisan Sabha (peasants' association), which was guided by the Communist Party, decided to initiate, on an experimental basis, a struggle for two-thirds of the harvest. This work tried to focus on how the Movement was originated and what was the background behind this movement.*

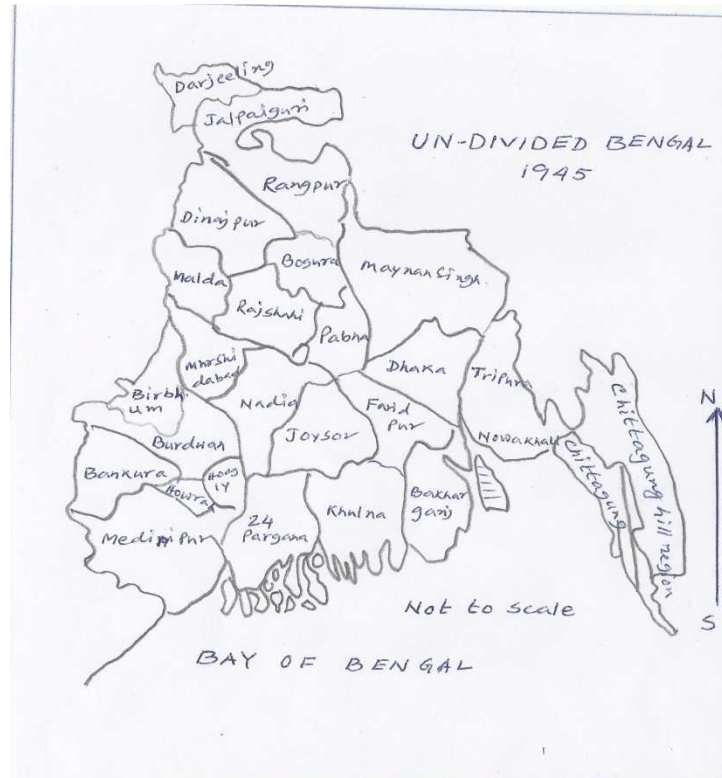
**KEYWORDS:** *Tebhaga, Zamindars, Jotedars, Bargadar, Exploitations, Kisan Sabha*

### INTRODUCTION

Tebhaga Movement was an uprising against the oppressive British Raj. *Tebhaga*, simply put, meant that two-thirds of the crops tilled by the *bargadars* and *adhiars* would have to go to them. The idea was to enact a law to give recognition to this demand. 41% of the farmers, according to the Land and Revenue Commission in 1940 were *bargadars* and *adhiars*. In the same year, the Commission had agreed that this demand was only in order. A draft bill had been readied and circulated. But this had been swept under the carpet later on. Jyoti Basu, asked Suhrawarddi, Chief Minister of undivided Bengal of as to why this had been done?<sup>1</sup> Suhrawarddi told him that he did not know that they had so many landlords in his party! In other words, he admitted that it was these *zamindars* who had forced the Bill to be dropped. The farmers waited for years. When it was realized that the Bill was only a dream, it was then decided that the *Tebhaga* demand should be turned into an agitation.

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<sup>1</sup> Jyoti Basu memories, Chapter VIII, *Tebhaga Movement*



**Figure 1: Un-Divided Bengal, Own Prepared Map (Not to Scale)**

*Bargadar* was a person who under the system generally known as *adhi*, *barga* or *bhag* cultivated the land of another person, on condition of delivering a share of the produce of such land to that person. The link between the *zamindars* and the British government was that *zamindars* would pay a yearly tax fixed by the government depending on the quantity and quality of the lands owned by the *zamindars*. How these lands would be cultivated, developed and what income would be generated was left to the *zamindars*. Below them was the class of *jotedars* to whom the *zamindars* distributed lands through a system called *Pattani*. The *Pattani* was achieved through negotiation on the basis of fixed taxes to be renewed and reviewed time to time. The *jotedars* class was directly connected with lands and cultivation. Although outside the *jotedari* system there were many land-owning individuals, small and big, who directly paid their land taxes to the *zamindars* through the *nayebi tahsildari* system of the *zamindars*, the *jotedars* in north Bengal used to own vast lands to the tune of hundreds and thousands of acres and they were the real class of people whose fortune and fate was directly land linked. Therefore, these people had to look after cultivation and development of lands so far its yield was concerned. Thus, the fate of the farmers was linked intricately with the *jotedari* system. Now, *jotedars* used two systems of cultivation. As for instance, they would employ agricultural laborers to cultivate lands under the direct supervision of the *jotedar* himself or give lease of lands to individual farmers, a small land-owning class of people who directly cultivated lands of their own or had taken lease from a *jotedar* for a particular period of time which depended on the will of the *jotedar*. The terms and conditions of such an arrangement meant all cost of cultivation of leased land had to be borne by the farmer; the total yield of to be shared equally between the cultivator and the owner of the land i.e. *jotedar*. This system of cultivation of land was commonly known as *Adhiary Pratha* (half-half system), mostly prevalent in north Bengal. This class was known as *adhiar* (half sharer). According to the Land Revenue Commission, 26 per cent families were dependent on *adhi* cultivation in Jalpaiguri district in 1939. Through this mechanism, just because a *jotedar* owned a piece of land he used to

derive benefit without investing anything in the land. Moreover, he used to exploit the labor of a cultivator in various forms, the poor *bargadar* becoming almost a slave of the landowner. There was always a constant threat that if he did not obey the *jotedar* he would take away the land and the *bargadar* would have to starve. This was a system of exploitation.

Thus *zamindari-jotedari* system used to be an instrument of exploitation. The grievances of peasants grew as the economic situation in the country worsened in the post War period that immediately followed a terrible famine (1942) throughout Bengal, at that time being governed by Muslim league with Shaheed Suhrawarddi as Chief Minister. The economic situation, political unrest, and unbearable social conditions of the peasants led to the movement later known as *Tebhaga Andolan* (Movement). The Communist leaders and *Krishak Samity* leaders took full advantage of the unrest prevailing among the poor peasants and landless agricultural laborers. The movement sparked off in an area under PS Chirirbandar in the district of Dinajpur. The area had a local Communist leader, Rupnarayan Roy, a small landowning farmer and local organizer of *Krishak Samity*, first and only MLA (member of the legislative assembly) of Bengal assembly elected on CPI ticket in 1946 election. He, together with other peasant leaders of the locality, led a movement in and around his locality and organized the peasants, mostly Hindus, belonging to *Kshatriya* caste and some Muslim cultivators in a grand assembly on the day when *jotedars'* men would come to collect fifty percent share of the crops. The assembled farmers refused to give fifty per cent; instead, they offered thirty-three per cent out of the total yield. A serious quarrel flared up between the *jotedars'* armed men and the adamant peasants causing injuries to both parties. Police came to the rescue of the *jotedars'* men and a peasant was killed in police fire. The event took a serious turn, local villagers came to the rescue of the peasants and the police had to retreat. But a couple of days later, reinforced police force inaugurated a reign of terror in the village after village in Chirirbandar police station- the leaders were hunted out, even common villagers including women were not spared from physical torture and repressive action. Hundreds of villagers were arrested.

The *jotedars* exacted illegally many other privileges. The condition of peasants worsened further due to wartime inflationary situation and famine. After the Bengal famine in 1943, the Bengal Provincial *Kishan Sabha*, which was guided by the Communist Party, called for a mass movement among sharecroppers in September 1946 to keep *tebhaga* (two-thirds) of the harvested crops. This demand had figured since the thirties in the programmes of the *Kishan Sabha*, and had also been recognized as just by the Flood Commission which in 1939-1940 had reviewed the miserable state of Bengal's agriculture. The Flood Commission, a land revenue commission established by the Govt. of Bengal in 1938,

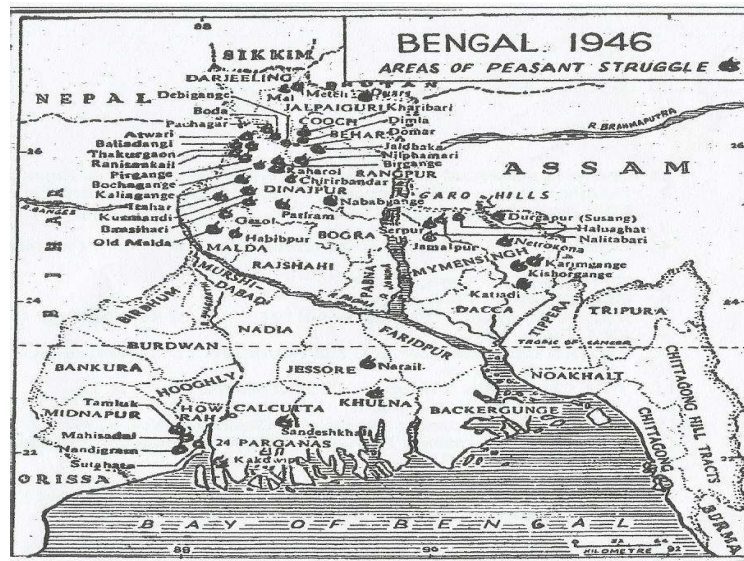


Figure 2

Source: The Map was Procured from the House of Md. Munna at Hemayetpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh on 26 December 2011

had exposed the maladies in the prevailing system which obliged sharecroppers to relinquish half of their harvest as rent, and on top of that, they had to pay scores of illegal cesses.<sup>2</sup> These sharecroppers were continuously drained of the wealth they produced. Communists went out to the countryside to organize peasants to take the harvested crop to their own threshing floor and make the two-thirds' share a reality. The slogan, *adhi noy, tebhaga chai* (we want two-thirds to share not 1/2) reverberated.<sup>3</sup> They started taking harvested crops to their own yards. They offered only 1/3 crop share to *jotedars*. This led to innumerable clashes and subsequent arrest, *lathi* charges and firing.

In 1946, *Krishak Sabhas* began to be established in various parts of the district of Midnapur like Mahishadal, Sutahata, Nandigram, Kharagpur, Tamluk, Ghatal, Kanthi, Bhagabanpur, and Keshpur. In late 1946, the sharecroppers (*bargadars*, *bhagchasis* or *adhiar*) of Bengal began to assert that they would pay not a half share of their crop to the *jotedars* but only one-third and that before the division of the crop, it would be stored in their own *khamars* (godowns) and not that of the *jotedars*. In September 1946, Bengal Provincial *Kishan Sabha* gave a call to implement through mass struggle the Flood Commission recommendation of *tebhaga*. In many places, peasants tried to remove the paddy already stored in the *jotedars'* *khamars* to their own and this resulted in innumerable clashes. Communist cadres, including many students from the urban areas, went out into the countryside to organize *bargadars*, who had become a major and growing section of the rural population. The poor peasants had lost land through depression and famine and were pushed down to the level of sharecroppers as they constituted sixty percent of villagers in some pockets which became *tebhaga* strongholds. The movement caught on from the harvest in November, with the central slogan *nij-khamare dhan tolo*; sharecroppers taking paddy to their own threshing floor and not to the *jotedar's* house. *Langal jar Jamin tar, Jan dibo tabu dhan dibona* were other battle cries.

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal*, vol. 1, p. 69

<sup>3</sup> *Peoples Age*, August 1946



Figure 3

Source: The Picture Requested from the West Bengal Cha Shramik Union, Kerani Para, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal on 4 April 2012

The movement received a boost in late January 1947 when the Muslim League Ministry led by Suhrawarddi<sup>4</sup> published the Bengal *Bargadars* Temporary Legislation Bill in the *Calcutta Gazette* on 22 January 1947.<sup>5</sup> The *jotedars* appealed to the Government, and the police attempted to suppress the peasants. The main centers of the movement were Dinajpur (Thakurgaon sub-division), Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Maldah, Mymensingh (Kishoreganj), Midnapur (Mahishadal, Sutahata, and Nandigram), and to a lesser extent 24 Parganas (Kakdwip) and Khulna.<sup>6</sup> *Jotedar* and police violence was sought to be countered by volunteers with *lathis*. In Nandigram, Sutahata and Mahishadal of Midnapur District, Bhupal Panda, Ananta Majhi, Pandit Jana led the movement by cutting of crops and dumping it on the threshing ground of the *bargadars*. Many of these areas were converted into *Sangram Anchal* or *Muktanchal* (Free Zone) as the government machinery failed to function there.

The peasant women had no economic right on the property in spite of their involvement in the production process and were relegated to the drudgery of household chores. Though doubly subjugated, they underwent a silent revolution during this movement. The *zamindar* and the *jotedar* exerted their rights over the women of the family of the *bargadars* and exploitation was carried out hand in hand. At that time, the married women of *bargadars* would get wages for their

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<sup>4</sup> Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (September 8, 1892 - December 5, 1963, Beirut) was a Pakistani left-wing statesman of Bengali origin, and one of the principal founding fathers of Pakistan. Appointed as the fifth Prime Minister in 1956, Suhrawardy headed Pakistan until 1957, and was a close associate of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, first Prime minister of Pakistan. Infamous for his role in the violent Direct Action Day in Calcutta, he advocated and played a major role in the success of Pakistan Movement and under auspices of Jinnah, Suhrawardy rose to prominence, and became an important ally of Jinnah in East-Pakistan. Suhrawardy was a populist leader who advocated socialism, left the ruling Muslim League in 1949 shortly after the death of Jinnah, to join East Pakistan Awami Muslim League of Maulana Bhashani, but was forced out from the party by the junior leadership.

<sup>5</sup> Chandra, Bipan, *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947*, Delhi: Penguin, 1989, pp. 352-353

<sup>6</sup> Sarkar, Sumit, *Modern India 1885-1947*, Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India 1983, p. 440

agricultural work.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps to defy such subjugation by the state and the patriarchal society, the women broke all norms of modesty and femininity prescribed for them and came to the forefront of the movement taking up whatever the domestic confines provided them - broomstick, sickle, chopper, sticks to protest against the repression of the police and save their menfolk and their crops which gave them the dignity to live. They themselves fought for their rights to be members of the Volunteer *Bahini* of the *Krishak Sabhas* and they formed the 'Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti' (Women's Self-defense Organization) after the famine of 1943.<sup>8</sup>

The new mode of resistance and forms of participation of the peasant women of Muhammadpur and Nandigram spread like wildfire and was replicated in other areas.<sup>9</sup> They helped establish communication surreptitiously, guarded secret meetings, protected crops in the fields, were appointed village guards and kept vigil on police action and alerted the peasant folk, barricaded police entry. The moment they caught sight of the police force, they blew conch shells and beat *kansar* (the bell-metal gong), shouted *Vande Mataram* to warn all and sundry. They even sacrificed life while trying to prevent police from entering villages and arresting fellow activists in Dinajpore, Jalpaiguri, 24 Parganas, Hooghly, and Howrah.<sup>10</sup> They formed *Jhanta Bahini* (A group wielding broom-stick) in Jessore district and *Gayen Bahini* (A group wielding rammer used for threshing) in Rangpur District. In Nandigram, Bimala Majhi organized the womenfolk. In every village along with the Volunteer Bahini existed a Nari Raksha Bahini.<sup>11</sup> A *jotedar* of Kendumari brought in the armed police when the *bargadars* tried to remove crops from his field to the godown of the *panchayat*. With police camps being set up everywhere, the Communist leaders called for a meeting in Kendumari. Women displayed unprecedented courage and militancy as they were subject to a silent revolution- a mass socio-economic consciousness. Bimala Majhi, who was one of the participants in the *Tebhaga* Movement in Midnapur district, came forward with her *Nari Raksha Bahini* armed with sickle, *banti* (a sharp instrument used to cut vegetables), broom in their hands and dust, salt and chilly powder tied to their clothes which they hurled at the police. Bhupal Panda, Ananta Majhi, Ramesh Jana along with eighty-eight others were arrested.<sup>12</sup> The poor peasant women, the most unorganized participants of the *Tebhaga* Movement, put up resistance which was mostly spontaneous and autonomous but militant.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Chattopadhyay, Kunal, *Tebhaga Andolaner Itihas*, Calcutta: 1987, p.103; Adrienne Cooper, 'Sharecroppers and Landlords in Bengal, 1930-50: The Dependency Web and its Implications', in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2-3, January/April 1983, p. 248

<sup>8</sup> Custers, Peter, *Women in Tebhaga Rising: 1946-1947*, Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1987

<sup>9</sup> Chattopadhyay, Kunal, *Tebhaga Andolaner Itihas*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1987, pp. 105 – 107

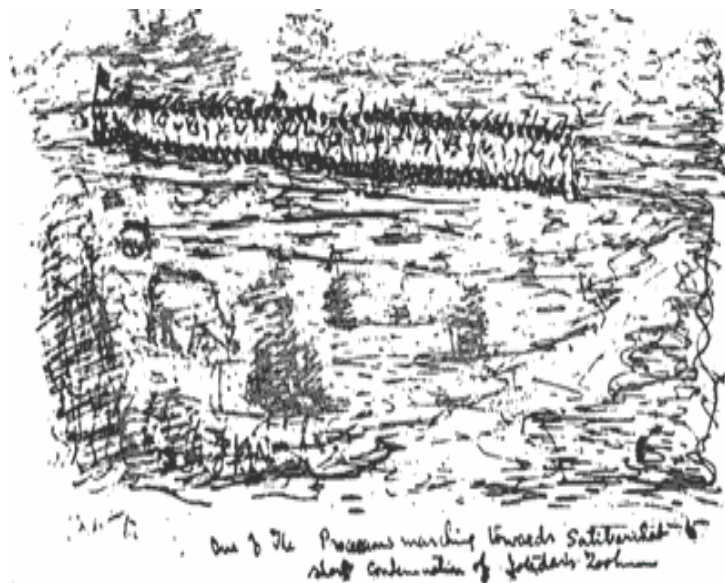
<sup>10</sup> Das, Susnata, *Abibhakta Banglar Krishak Sangram: Tebhaga Andolaner Artha-Rajnaitik Prekshit-Parjalochana-Punarbichar*, Calcutta: Nakshatra Publishers, 2002, pp. 173-190

<sup>11</sup> Chattopadhyay, Kunal, *Tebhaga Andolaner Itihas*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1987, p. 106

<sup>12</sup> Bhattacharyya, Jayanta, *Banglar 'Tebhaga' - Tebhaga Sangram*, Calcutta: The Black Hole, 1996, p. 88

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112

Peasant men and women, many of them Muslims, attacked the granaries of local landlords or *jotedars*, to recover stocks of paddy already stored there. The rural structure of oppression was truly crumbling, as many landlords fled the villages, some of them disguised in women's clothes. Coinciding with the partially spontaneous nature of the uprising was the principal role that women played in it. Even in areas such as the interior villages of Nandigram, where women were not supposed to participate in cultivation in the field and where their agricultural tasks were largely limited to processing the harvested paddy, it was apparent that women had definite stakes in the success of the *Tebhaga* campaign. Even more so than their husbands, rural poor women had suffered heavily, inhumanly, from the Bengal famine of 1943. For these women, the storing of paddy in their own houses, for the first time in their lives, was a revolutionary event. It evoked tremendous emotional response. It, therefore, was no accident that rural poor women in massive numbers came forward to defend the movement's gains.



**Figure 4: Men and Women in the Tebhaga Movement**  
**Source: The Picture was Procured from the House of Md. Munna**  
**At Hemayetpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh on 26 December 2011**

When the colonial state befriending the landlords, unleashed terror and intimidation to crush the movement, women throughout Bengal put up fierce resistance with men against police raids. From the forested area of Sunderbans in the South through the Norail subdivision in Jessore to Dinajpur in the north, village women spontaneously set up their *Nari Bahini* or semi-militia groups, facing rifles with brooms, pestles, and knives. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to state that in this towering political event, rural poor women played a lead role.

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