

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT OF UNDIVIDED NORTH BENGAL (1946-47)

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On the eve of Indian Independence Bengal had to face a violent peasant resistance in the form of Tebhaga movement. It was a major peasant movement of Bengal. It began immediately after the horrible communal atrocities followed by the Direct Action Day of the Muslim League (on 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1946). The call for Tebhaga was raised by the sharecroppers of Bengal under the leadership of Bangiya Pradeshi Krishak Sabha for enforcing the demand mentioned in the report of the Flood Commission that the sharecroppers should have the right on two third share of the produce instead of half. The call for Tebhaga soon culminated in the movement commencing in Sept 1946 and ultimately it took a violent form within a few months. The slogan was 'Adhi noy Tebhaga chai' that means, we want two third share of the harvest instead of half. There is no denying the fact that, it was the last largest peasant movement of undivided Bengal.

The term 'Tebhaga' was not simply a slogan, rather it was a protest against the age long domination and oppression of the Jotedars or Zamindars on the peasants of rural Bengal. In different districts of the Northern part of undivided Bengal such as, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogura, Malda, Jalpaiguri, the movement became popular and violent too. Here in North Bengal, the Oraon, Muslim, Santhal and Rajbanshi peasants joined the movement in large numbers. But one of the striking features of the movement was the participation of peasant women who were the prominent players of the movement and gave the movement the push that it needed in order to be successful. They did not belong to any upper strata of the society, rather belonged to the poor, down-trodden and middle class section of peasant society of our rural North Bengal. Most of these women folk were the Rajbanshis.

We are bound to accept the fact that much have been said and much have been written on the various aspects of peasant movement in Bengal. But it is willingly or unwillingly the historians or the researchers have retained their long silence in glorifying or highlighting the role of women in historical events. The Tebhaga movement of Bengal was no more exception. Recently attempts have been made in this direction by Sunil Sen, Peter Caster and a few others. Yet such attempts were not up to the satisfaction. Later on the researchers and a few historians of North Bengal have taken an effort in this direction. It is against this historical backdrop I shall try to highlight and assess their specific role played by the women in the Tebhaga movement of undivided North Bengal.

The study will emphasize on the following points:

- When and in what ways did the women participate in the movement?
- What were the factors that provoked them to take an active part in the movement?
- What was the nature and importance of their role in the movement?

Here, in North Bengal, the women joined the movement at a time when the intensity of the movement got accelerated in terms of the policy of oppression followed by the government for protecting the rights and interests of the Jotedars or Zamindars. The farm houses of the Jotedars or Zamindars were targeted and looted by the peasants and in response of which the police force began to oppress the peasants and arrested many of their leaders. It was at this juncture that the women from the peasant families came to the forefront in large numbers to take the challenge of protecting the peasants from governmental oppression.

The message of Tebhaga had a deep impact on undivided North Bengal like other parts of Bengal. The districts where the movement spread massively included Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogura, Malda and Jalpaiguri. But the epicentre of the movement was the Thakurgaon sub division. In Thakurgaon, the police force had to face a

strong opposition from the peasant women. The women came to resist the police personnel against the murder of two local peasant leaders in January, 1947. At this situation, a young married girl named 'Bhandani' attacked the police. She snatched away the gun from the Daroga and confined him to a house. Bhandani along with two other peasant women named Jaymani and Rani Mitra tried to mobilize the other peasant women for their common programmes. It was due to their resistance the police had to leave the village. At Atoari village of Thakurgaon, a peasant woman named Dipeswari Singh saved the peasants from the police men. On 20<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1947, six local peasant leaders were arrested by the police in Khanapur. At this time Jasoda Rani Sarkar came forward with her Nari Bahini to lead the peasants against the illegal arrest of the peasant leaders. Jasoda Rani finally lost her life in the police firing.

In Rangpur district, particularly at Nilfamari and Dimla, a local school mistress named Rani Mukherjee, gave a new direction to the peasants. At Dimla, the Gain Bahini which was a voluntary organization of the womenfolk, came to resist the oppression of the Jotedars or Zamindars with their billhooks, brooms and pests. In Malda district, the Rajbanshi and Santhal women of Gazole, old Malda and Habibpur, participated in the movement.

The message of Tebhaga also inspired a large number of women in the district of Jalpaiguri situating in the northernmost part of North Bengal. In Thakurgaon, the police force had to face a strong opposition from the peasant women. The intensity of the movement in Jalpaiguri was felt in the police stations of Deviganj, Boda, Pachagarh, Mal and Matelli. At Deviganj, Purneswari Devi gave the leadership and brought the movement to an extreme point. Under the leadership of Burima or Old Mother, the movement spread to different parts of the district. A large number of women from poor and middle class peasant families joined her. They were Ujani Barmani, Lila Sen (later became Lila Majumder, wife of Charu Majumder), Buri Barmani (Maidandighi), Maili Majhi (Denguajhar) and others. Burima was known for her efficiency in organizing the movement. She popularized the slogan 'Jan dibo, tabu dhan dibona' that means we would not give rice instead we would sacrifice our life.

In the Duars of Jalpaiguri, the Oraon women like Mangro Oraoni, Poko Oraoni tried a lot to mobilize the tribal women of Duars. As a consequence of which we find large scale participation of Oraon women who added a new spirit to the movement.

From the above discussion, it seems very much clear that the peasant women came to join the movement spontaneously. Their role was militant in nature. Now the question arises in our mind that what were the factors or the issues that inspired or pushed them to take an active part in the movement? Was there any political compulsion or socio economic factors? Recent researches have brought the fact into light that the women were rather guided by their spirit of establishing the long awaited social justice. Their active participation in the movement was undoubtedly outstanding in the history of economic exploitation, social tyranny and oppression existing for a long time in the so called feudal or semi feudal structure of Bengal's society.

At the same time the women challenged the male or patriarchal domination too. In the recent researches it is found that, the women had been under two kinds of exploitation- economic and social. The later was very much related to the sexual exploitation. Actually the socioeconomic structure of Bengal rested on the pillar of exploitation of the peasants. Both men and women jointly contributed to the process of production. Therefore, exploitation of the peasants meant exploitation of the both. The jotedars and Zamindars exploited the peasants from most of their produce in the name of giving the half share. Moreover, points to be noted that they had to bear the expenditure of the system by which they were being exploited by the Jotedars or Zamindars. Along with their male counterparts the women were an integral part of that exploitation. Thus the women had been nourishing in their mind a feeling of genuine hatred to the existing society of Bengal. This hatred in the long run came to be intensified by some other types of exploitation. The peasant women were thought to be the property of the Jotedars or Zamindars. Therefore, they were bound to work at the house of the Jotedars or Zamindars as daily workers. Even sometimes it was found that, many Jotedars got

married with the daughters of the sharecroppers and thus the women came under two types of exploitation. They had to pay labour as a free maid servant on the one hand and as a bedfellow on the other in order to meet the sexual hunger of the Jotedars or Zamindars. Thus the exploitation of the peasant women led them to go against the Jotedars or the Zamindars. They wanted to protest against the evils that had shattered their self respect, social position and dignity as a woman. The call for Tebhaga inspired them and provided them with the best opportunity for expressing their long nourished grievances against the exploitation by the landlords of the society.

It is observed from the writings of Rani Dasgupta that the women became very active in the movement in North Bengal under the leadership of Kishan Sabha. They helped the peasant leaders either by warning them against the impending police attack or passing the news of such attacks in the neighbouring villages. Kunal Chattopadhyay, in his book has highlighted the historical significance of the role played by the women in the Tebhaga movement. Bhabani Sen wrote in September, 1947, that the most backward, downtrodden and illiterate peasant women played a decisive and glorious role for protecting their paddy, family and social respect. The courage and self sacrifice showed by these women during the movement was undoubtedly unparalleled in the history of women emancipation also. It is to be remembered that since the time renaissance in Bengal the idea of women emancipation was very much limited to the cities or towns. Perhaps, this is for the first time it touched the rural Bengal. Thus Tebhaga movement laid the foundations of a new kind of awakening amongst the rural women in the northern part of undivided Bengal. This awakening may be described as the signal for a new Renaissance in the social life of the then Bengal.

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