



The Kangsabati Project: The Role of Women in Regional Peasant Movements

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The Kangsabati Reservoir was constructed at the confluence of the Kangsabati and Kumari rivers in Mukutmanipur, Bankura district, West Bengal. This project was adopted during the Second Five-Year Plan and commenced in 1956-57, concluding in 1964-65. The government's primary objective in initiating this project was to improve the agricultural system in the dry, drought-prone southwestern region of West Bengal. Additionally, the project aimed for electricity generation, flood control, fisheries development, and drinking water supply. Notably, it stands as Asia's largest and the world's second-largest earthen dam.

The Kangsabati project was implemented in present-day Mukutmanipur. It involved the construction of two dams and reservoirs on the Kangsabati and Kumari rivers, with two main canals and their branches on the left and right banks, totaling a length of 3700 kilometers. Construction began in 1956, and irrigation work started in 1964. Beyond Bankura, the project benefited areas extending to Midnapore, Jhargram, and even Goghat in Hooghly district.

The Kangsabati reservoir project was entirely funded and executed by the government, with noble intentions. Its goals included irrigation for agriculture across four districts (including Bankura), flood prevention, drinking water supply, and electricity generation. The reservoir was designed to irrigate 323,748 hectares (800,000 acres) for Kharif crops and 60,703 hectares (150,000 acres) for Rabi crops. The beneficiary districts were Bankura, Midnapore (which bifurcated into West Midnapore and Jhargram from January 1, 2022), and Hooghly, making a total of four districts.

Challenges During Project Implementation

However, the government faced significant obstacles during the project's implementation. This was because, despite the decision to construct the project at the governmental level, issues of compensation and rehabilitation were not addressed or even mentioned. Protests began at the local level. It was observed that during the project's execution, over 25,000 people faced uncertainty regarding food and shelter.

Thirty *mouzas* (revenue villages) were completely submerged, most of 33 *mouzas*, and parts of 110 *mouzas* were submerged and obliterated under this project. Consequently, the displaced and affected people initiated a movement demanding rehabilitation and compensation. It is crucial to

note that they did not want the project to stop; they were all in favour of it, their only demand being "compensation and rehabilitation."

173 mouzas name listed below:

30 mouzas (revenue villages) completely submerged

Bankura District - Ranibandh Police station:

Ghughijan, Gosaidihi, Tuman, Kajalkura, Basantapur, naranpur, Dudhyajharna, Poreshnath, Chiyada, Purnapani, Ladhanbani, Layekbandh, Katakumari, Puddi, Jharia, Baddi - Total 16 villages.

- **Bankura**

Khatra, Shurigora, Jhantipahari, Shabaga, Satshol, Kendua – Total 5 villages.

- **Purulia District**

1. **Manbazar (1)**

Darashol, Chotonyunani, Maismura, Bamandiha, Goborda, Deka, Katanga, Piyarogari Chowk, Koldiha - Total 9 villages.

2. **Manbazar (2)**

Shikari Jangal, Kantagora, Budhpur, Khudapara, Mirgichanda, Tyantla, Ghat, Punda, Goldai, Phulberia - 10 villages.

most of 33 mouzas submerged

Ranibandh Police station:

Gopalpur, Ksumkhundi, Narkoli, Banpukuria, Sarengore, Balarampur, Nilgiri, Kholkuri, Deulvira, Ramdungri, Barunia – Total 11 villages.

3. **Manbazar (1)**

Dhanara, Boronyunani, Monbadyar, Horiharpur, Shusna, Porashigora, Dhaddkidi, Udaypur, Bargajori, Jorbera, Polashboni, Bauridiha, Dabar, Ragsarka, Khoyerboni – Total 14 villages.

4. **Manbazar (2)**

Dhaddkidi, Susunia, Amjora, Duradi, Burudi, Lodda, Rangametya, Kashipur, Rtyakacha, Krishnapur, Bharariya, Gobindapur, Doladanga, Jamda, Lagdagora, Banshketia, Shukhapata, Gaidumri, Mohandi, Dhanga, Lobobari, Panara, Bhngroti – Total 23 villages.

5. **Khatra**

Mukutmonipur, Pulhori, Damdi, Jambedia, Kunarbahal, Lohadi, Shimrampur, Golokpur, Monara, Bhuardihi, Luthia, Jhapandihi, Vedula, Sitarampur, Kundhurka – Total 15 villages.

Parts of 110 mouzas submerged

Ranibandh:

Kamarkuli, Lipidiri, Mukundapur, Dulalpur, Lodda Dhanara, - Total 6 villages.

6. Manbazar(1)

Bonmohara, Mohoddbona, Phalabari, Basudi, Harakrishnapur, Bonkati, Keshiardi, Akshyapur, Paruldiha, Kalupara, Rashipdihi, Hirapur, Polami, Mukundapur, Nimdiha, Chandra, Pairachali, Joysinghapur, Simchaka, Paingara, Bonkati, Dhudhupur, Moheshpur, Amtora, Goyalpara, Behanchabni, Pratappur, Borosagen, - Total 27 villages.

7. Manbazar(2)

Bagora, Pirra, Darikadoba, Bhalukdihi, Phulbera, Mukundapur, Dharonpur, Lalpur, Kuchlikela, Sarengadihi, Topahad, Dhogra, Porshya, Dyashardihi, Hatilada, Shurtona, Manpur, Bishari, Golkidi, Bonkata, Doldoriya, Chirudi, Ichhadi, Llaboni, Balarampur, Chalka, Bag Ghuti – Total 27 villages.

8. Khatra

Dhogra, Baroghutu, Rajadali, Khandarani, Itamara, Dharampur, Buchudungri, Paira, Simlabandh, Biradihi – Total 10 villages.

(courtesy by Nakul Mahato)



(courtesy by Nakul Mahato)

Causes of the Movement

The reasons for the protests were entirely local but fundamental. The project's implementation led to over 25,000 people facing uncertainty regarding food and housing. Constructing the dam by obstructing the flow of the Kangsabati and Kumari rivers required 20,000 acres of land, which included numerous villages. At that time, agriculture was the primary and sole livelihood in these regions. Fearing the loss of their land and villages, the local populace launched a movement. This movement came to be known as the "**Kangsabati Movement**" or "**Jalđubi Andolan**" (Movement of Submergence).

The people of the affected region faced immense losses due to the project's implementation. Jaleshwar Hansda, one of the movement's leaders, clearly articulated the detrimental aspects of the project and the displacement of people in an interview published in "Banglar Avash" Patrika (Bengali version). It is important to remember that neither he nor the people from the affected areas wished for the project to halt. They all supported the project but wanted it to proceed with the rehabilitation of the displaced people. This demand for rehabilitation and compensation led to fierce resistance. Initially, a committee of twelve members was formed to lead the movement.

Although women were not formally part of the committee, but they played a crucial role in organizing the movement.

Leadership and Strategy

The leaders of this movement in the context of the Kangsabati project included Jaleshwar Hansda, Motilal Mahato, Nakul Mahato (Purulia), Nakul Mahato (Bankura), and Mrityunjay Banerjee, among others. Notable women leaders included Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato (wife of Motilal Mahato) and Smt. Aloka Banerjee (wife of Mrityunjay Banerjee).

Learning from the Tebhaga and Telangana movements, the Kangsabati resistance movement did not resort to militant activities. Their movement was conducted peacefully through civil disobedience and non-cooperation. Therefore, women from all villages were placed at the forefront in breaking police barricades, obstructing machinery, and blocking roads. For example, in 1959, when land levelling began with machinery for the first time, women sat in front of the bulldozers in the front row. Elderly women and children from homes were also present. When the cordon was broken to stop the machinery, Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato, Motilal Mahato's wife, was among the first to act.

Significant Role of Women in the Jalḍubi Andolan

Women played an immensely significant role in the Jalḍubi Andolan. In this movement Women worked together with men in unity. They participated with men. Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato, Aloka Banerjee, Radhika Mahato, Annada Kumbhokar (Kumor), among others, played significant roles in the Kangsabati or Jalḍubi Andolan. Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato is the wife of Motilal Mahato, one of the movement's leaders. Aloka Banerjee is the wife of Mrityunjay Banerjee, another prominent leader of the Kangsabati movement. Both are currently alive, though Aloka Banerjee is ill and suffering from memory loss.

Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato:



Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato, wife of Motilal Mahato, entered politics through her husband. In the Jalḍubi Andolan, she skillfully engaged women from every household in the movement. She was with her husband, Motilal Mahato, from the very beginning of the movement. When Food

Minister Prafulla Chandra Sen visited Keshara, she organized all the village women and staged a sit-in protest in front of the minister's stage. The demonstration was attended by women from Keshara and all surrounding villages, including children and the elderly. Men were at the very back. The sit-in continued for several hours. Eventually, the Food Minister left without addressing the villagers' demands.

In 1957, machinery began to be deployed for land clearing. The government survey office was temporarily set up in Gorabari (Mukutmonipur, Bankura). Next to it, the Kangsabati Reservoir Committee office was established. The movement was directed from here, and the action plan was decided at Bijayalakshmi Devi's home in Keshara. She was involved in all discussions with Jaleswar Hansda, Mrityunjay Banerjee, Nakul Mahato, and her husband. Her opinions on leading the movement with women were given significant importance.

According to Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato (interview on 04/11/2024), "From the day the machinery was deployed to level the land by breaking the field boundaries, the mothers and sisters of the houses joined the movement. Every morning, everyone came in groups with their children for the sit-in. They spent the entire day there. In the evening, everyone returned home, cooked, and ate. No one had to be called separately to come to the protest. Everyone participated in the movement on their own accord because some had land, or some worked on others' land. Thus, everyone spontaneously participated in the movement due to the fear of losing their livelihood and displacement. All wage work ceased during this period. Finally, on November 14, 1969, the women withdrew their protest after being assured of compensation and rehabilitation."

At the height of the movement, Bijayalakshmi Mahato traveled to various villages, raising awareness among women and strengthening the organization. A gathering of nearly 10,000 people took place in Haludkanali, with Bijayalakshmi Mahato at its forefront. When organizing in villages or holding meetings, mothers were accompanied by their young children. Food and lodging would be arranged in a village house. She was accompanied by Radhika Mahato, Annada Kumor, and others.

On the day of the 'Ekhan' a local festival in 1960, a long women's procession of about 15 kilometers was organized from Gorabari Dam to Khatra via Gorabari, led by Gunadhar Chowdhury and others. Motilal Mahato, his wife Bijayalakshmi Mahato, and their three-and-a-half-month-old son Shyamal Kumar were also in this procession. The police and paramilitary forces stopped the procession and arrested many protesters, including Motilal Mahato, his wife Bijayalakshmi Mahato, and their infant son Shyamal Kumar. They were arrested on December 15, 1960. Annada Kumbhakar was also arrested at the same time.

Many others were arrested along with them in this long procession and were imprisoned. Due to lack of space in the jail, many were released far away that very night. Many other protesters were released after a few days. They were released after serving approximately three months in prison. Shortly after being released from prison, Bijayalakshmi Devi developed a problem in her leg and became bedridden. She was treated by the eminent physician Mahantalal Chowdhury, one of the leaders of the leftist movement and Krishak Sabha in Bankura district. After some time, she recovered somewhat and continued the protest movement with renewed vigor. However, Bijayalakshmi Devi's leg has not yet fully recovered from the illness. In this context, it should be remembered that Annada Kumbhakar did not eat rice for a single day while in jail, only bread or other dry food. It is also worth mentioning that while touring various villages for organizing the movement, they sold and promoted the Krishak Sabha's magazine. Another point is that from the

time of their arrest on December 15, 1960, the civil disobedience movement intensified for approximately three months.

Smt. Aloka Banerjee:



Smt. Aloka Banerjee was one of the prominent women leaders of the second phase of the Kangsabati movement. She was the able wife of Mrityunjay Banerjee, one of the key leaders of this movement and other leftist and peasant movements. Her marriage to Mrityunjay Banerjee occurred during the peak of the movement. A brief yet extensive description of her life before and after marriage is available from Sri Gautam De's account. He wrote, "During this phase, Mrityunjay's personal life was almost destitute, unstable, and that of a political worker walking on an uncertain path. He was not in a position to marry, perhaps he didn't even think about it. But he had to get married out of a challenge. The incident took place in public meetings with thousands of women. Finally, in Khirabani village of Bishnupur police station, where his maternal uncle's house was. A completely helpless, very young widow resided there. Some villagers wanted to force that twenty-year-old woman into an uncertain, unknown future against her will. Mrityunjay resisted. As usual, he was challenged to marry that woman. He accepted the challenge and married in 1959. Mrityunjay Banerjee's wife, Aloka Banerjee, was actively by Mrityunjay's side, dedicated to communist ideals. At one time, the entire district's working-class people knew her. They accepted her as their own. Today she is weak and aged."

She was introduced to leftist ideals by her husband, Mrityunjay Banerjee, and began her political journey with him. She was firm in public welfare and awareness campaigns. Wherever she went, her bag always contained various newspapers and pamphlets of the Krishak Sabha. Her able son, Sri Biplab Banerjee, states that "at that time, these pamphlets and newspapers were sold for two annas. During the organization of the Jaldubi movement, they stayed in their beloved Lakshmi aunt's drawing-room in Keshra village. All day long, they travelled from village to village with Lakshmi aunt (Bijayalakshmi Mahato) and others, carrying children."

She travelled to over a hundred tribal villages in the Khatra-Ranibandh police station area to organize the movement for the Kangsabati project in Mukutmanipur. She mobilized women in various villages to create resistance. In Haludkanali, along with Bijayalakshmi Mahato, she organized resistance movements and 1961, the movement succeeded.

Impact and Significance of the Movement

From the statements of Jaleshwar Hansda, a key leader of the Kangsabati movement, we learn about the contribution of women to this movement. He states that, "on March 14, 1960, a meeting was held in his village, Basantapur, attended by about two to two and a half thousand people. The agenda was related to the movement". He also states that "it was around three o'clock at that time. At that moment, Krishna Mandal of Basantapur village rushed frantically to our meeting. He reported that the police had cordoned off the southern field of Basantapur *mouza* and were trying to clear the land. After hearing this news, we all went and saw that many women from our village were returning home with firewood on their heads, and the police had cordoned off the area and were clearing the land with a tractor. They then dropped their firewood and obstructed the work. Many women stood in front of the tractor machine."

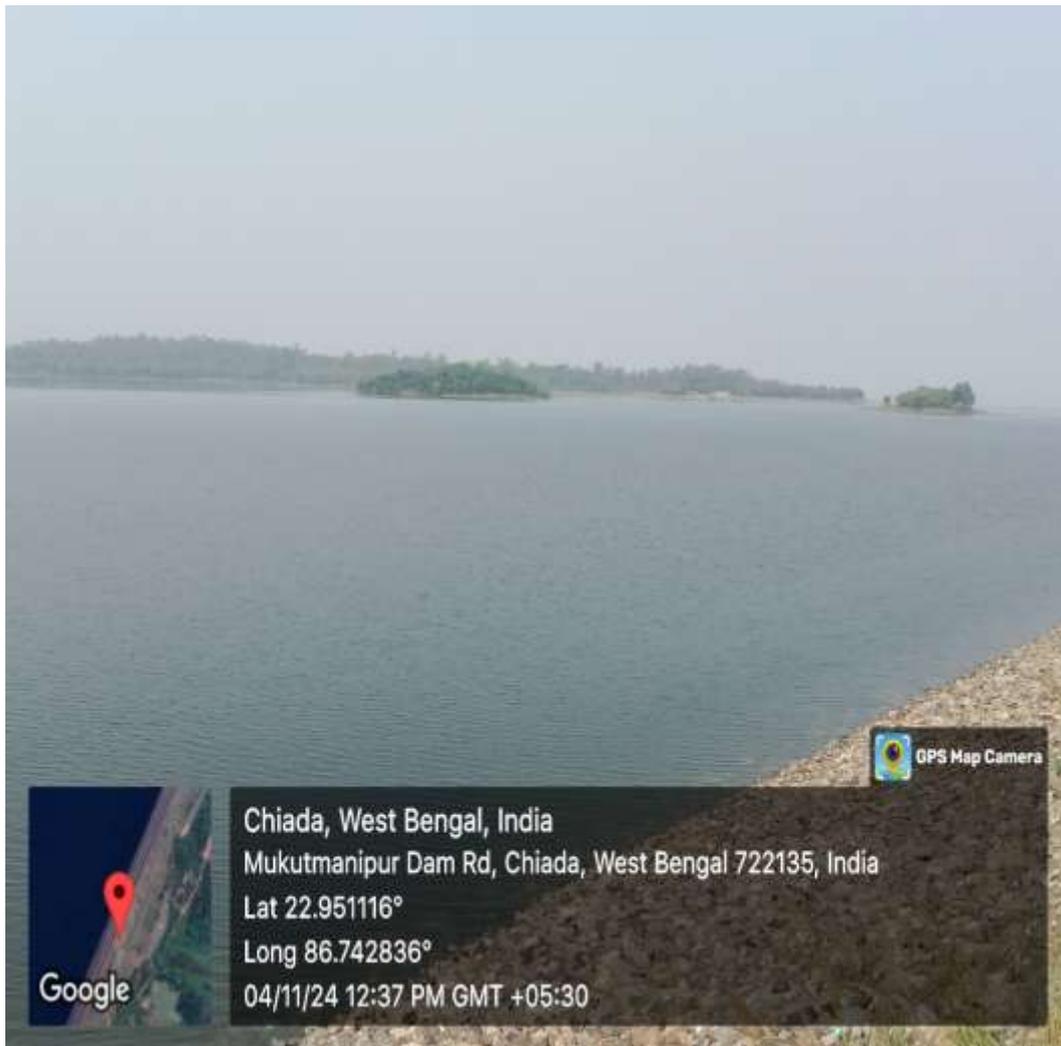
He further states that in December 1960, the police again cordoned off the Jhatipahari *mouza* and began to occupy land and dismantle *argars* (earthen embankments). This news was known from the beginning. The movement thus began. Several programs were adopted for the movement. In this context, the day after Poush Parban, i.e., Ekhan day (a local festival), a procession of women started from Gorabari to Khatra, covering about 15-16 kilometers, led by Gunadhar Chowdhury, from eight in the morning, traversing ten to twelve villages including Gorabari and Khatra, and returning home by five in the evening. Jaleshwar Hansda's mother and aunts were in this procession. On December 15, 1960, Mati Mahato and his wife Bijayalakshmi Mahato, along with their three-month-old son Shyamal Kumar, were arrested by the police. The civil disobedience movement continued for approximately three months. The participation of people of all ages, from children to the elderly, in the movement was remarkable.

In terms of results and significance, the importance of this Jalḍubi Andolan at the local level is immense. In almost all regional movements organized in India and West Bengal, police brutality reached extreme levels, or bloodshed occurred. However, in the movement organized concerning the Kangsabati project, there is no sign of bloodshed. Even though the police were overzealous in a few cases, there were no incidents of torture. Although the police formed cordons or barricades to clear the land, they moved aside upon seeing women advance. Above all, the movement was always conducted with the ideals of civil disobedience or Satyagraha. As a result, success was inevitable.

The movement began in 1957 and achieved partial success in 1962. The first phase of the movement was from 1957 to 1960. In this phase, Smt. Bijayalakshmi Mahato played a significant role among women. The second phase of the movement was from 1960 to 1962. In this phase, Aloka Banerjee played a crucial role. The movement achieved success in 1962 when the government promised compensation, and the contribution of women to this success was significant.

Regarding the contribution of women, it can also be said that two of the movement's prominent leaders, Motilal Mahato and Mrityunjay Banerjee, were able to evade arrest several times with the help of village women. They even disguised themselves as women to go into hiding. Their bags always contained saris, bangles, etc. From the statements of Motilal Mahato's wife and youngest son, it is known that while he was hiding in Raja Kata village of Khatra, the police surrounded the entire village to catch him. Everyone was sure that he would be caught this time. At this time, some women went outside the village to fetch water. Mati Mahato escaped in

disguise with this group of women. By the time the police realized, he was far away. It should be remembered that a reward of several thousand rupees had been announced for his capture at that time. Therefore, the direct and indirect contribution of women to the movement is highly commendable. However, they remained out of the public eye and are now almost forgotten.



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