

POST-INDEPENDENCE DISTURBANCE IN BENGAL A STUDY OF FOOD MOVEMENT IN WEST DINAJPUR

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ABSTRACT

The most thrust area of writing history at recent time is the study of local history. As a consequence of the paradigm shift of the historical studies, actual local history can be derived through the in-depth studies of various historical phenomena of the districts. From this insight, through the cross-examinations of the districts of Bengal also may usher the real history or may promote its historicity. In this point of view, as the district of West Dinajpur of West Bengal witnessed so many post-Independence disturbances, particularly in 1950's, this district definitely claims a special attention.

One of the greatest disturbances in the district was 'Tebhaga Movement' in 1946-47 in the eve of the Independence of India. The historic Tebhaga movement unified the rural poor and created a point of inspiration for kisans in the then united Bengal. Another disturbance was the 'Anti-Banga-Bihar-Merger Movement' in 1950's. In the same decade, Balurghat subdivision witnesses a serious and challenging movement which turned into disturbance was the 'Movement against the Shifting of District Headquarters'. The subdivision of the district, Raigunj observed another movement which took a serious place was the 'Refugee Movement' immediate after the Independence.

The most important and significant one was the 'Food Movement of 1959'. In the mid-1950, the severe state-wide food crisis, we witnessed. The movement highly affected Balurghat subdivision. The district of West Dinajpur was severely dominated by the native Zamindars. They were much aggressive towards the refugees and even towards the common people. Their dominance in society and also the political influence were deep rooted and henceforth their exploitation was unrestrained.

KEYWORDS: Tebhaga, Zamindar, Share-Cropper, Michhil

INTRODUCTION

The most significant phenomenon of writing History in present scenario is to make an insight upon the Local History. In this point of view, the district of West Dinajpur of West Bengal witnessed so many post-Independence disturbances. The district witnessed a few disturbances in post-Independence period and particularly in 1950's. One of the greatest disturbances in the district was 'Tebhaga Movement' in 1946-47 in the eve of the Independence of India.¹ The historic Tebhaga movement unified the rural poor and created a point of inspiration for kisans in the then united Bengal. Another disturbance was the 'Anti-Banga-Bihar-Merger Movement' in 1950's. In the same decade, Balurghat subdivision witnesses a serious and challenging movement which turned into disturbance was the 'Movement against the Shifting of District Headquarters'. The subdivision of the district, Raigunj observed another movement which took a

¹ Biswanath Chakraborty, Paschim Dinajpur Jelar Rajnaitik Itihas, 1985

serious place was the 'Refugee Movement' immediate after the Independence.

The most important and significant one was the 'Food Movement of 1959'. In the mid-1950's, the severe state-wide food crisis, we witnessed. The commodities for every-day need – became rare and price rose to high. The rationing system fully collapsed. The unemployed or the people who lost job used to move about for a bit of food. The movement highly affected Balurghat subdivision. The district of West Dinajpur was severely dominated by the native zamindars. They were much aggressive towards the refugees and even towards the common people. Their dominance in society and also the political influence were deep rooted and henceforth their exploitation was unrestrained.²

Multiple-Facets: According to Census of India, 1951, total number of dependants on agrarian sector were 1,40,00,000 - of which the number of agricultural labourer were 30,41,000 as well as share-croppers numbering 29,80,000. It is noticed that 30 per cent of the total number of peasants lost their agricultural land. In spite of that, according to the Report of the Land Commission, Bengal (popularly known as the Floud Commission), the percentage of the total peasant class, i.e., agricultural labourer and share-croppers was below 35 per cent.³ The Report estimated in 1940 that there were five million share-croppers in the undivided Bengal Province. After Partition, roughly one-third of the land mass came to West Bengal. A rough guess would put number of share-croppers in West Bengal to be 1.6 million.⁴ However, it is clear that a huge number of people turned into the agricultural labourers and share-croppers within the decade. No doubt, it was an alarming to agrarian sector. The unlimited dominance of the feudatory-zamindari system over peasant class directly and indirectly was responsible for the absolute deterioration of the peasant class.

The district witnessed the slow urbanization. So, naturally the region was highly depended on agrarian activities. The contemporary peasant leaders made a vivid description about their unrestrained exploitation upon the peasants. A few leaders as Pijush Das, Asit Ghosh and Shanti Das at Raigunj; Nanigopal Roy at Kaliagunj and Kesto Barman at Hemtabad. Started the peasant-organization in 1950's.⁵ It is to be noted in this connection that the peasant movement organization was mainly conducted in Balurghat and Raigunj subdivision immediate after the Independence. Though the tebhaga started before Independence, but the peasant- organization could not develop much immediate after the Independence. It is to be mentioned that the peasant-organization got its new shape through the new circumstance provided by the refugee movement. The refugees joined with peasant-organization.⁶ In this regard, it is relevant to point out that the basic issue behind the refugee movement was the land-issue. As the land-issue was the common periphery, very naturally, refugee-movement merged with the peasant organization.

According to the record, the Government imposed a high rate of levy upon the rice. The peasant-class protested against the imposition of levy upon the paddy in 1952. Mainly, the police-force collected the levy forcibly by the invisible support of the landed groups. It is to be stated in this regard that this movement was organized by the leadership of the

² Paschim Dinajpur Jelar Gana-Andolon: Paryalochona O Prekshapat – Mukul Basu, Madhuparni, Paschim Dinajpur Sankhya, 1399 B.S. , P – 211

³ Pradosh Kumar Bagchi, Marxbadi Path, Vol. 29, No. 1, May-August, 2009

⁴ D. Bandyopadhyay, Tebhaga Movement in Bengal: A Retrospect, in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 36, No. 41, October, 2001

⁵ Dilip Ghosh Roy, Shahar Kendrik Gana-andolon: Raigunj Mahakuma, D. Roy (ed.) Raigunjer Itihas, p – 60

⁶ Ibid.

Leftist Parties at Balurghat. Mukul Bose of R.S.P. was one of the prominent and active leader of the Movement.⁷

A severe movement was organized in protest of police julum (oppression) in a few villages, as Kai Gram, Gopal Bati, Madargunj Hat, Nazirpur Hat, etc. of Balurghat Subdivision. A movement had spread through Hat-Prochar (announcing in village market), Baithak (meeting) and Gana-swakshar (mass signature). A movement had been built up against the julum of levy-collection programme by Government in a few area of West Dinajpur i.e., Balurghat, Patiram, Kantabari, Danrail, Bhikhahar, Marnai, Itahar, Madhuban, Malan etc. in 1952-54. The peasants and share-croppers built up the movement against the eviction of peasants and share-croppers as the result of land reformation in 1954 which tremendously spread over the various part of the district, particularly in Banshihari and Itahar police station.⁸

The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953, came into force on the 12th February, 1954. The effect of this Act was that all the intermediaries who stood between the tillers of the soil and the State ceased to exist. In 1954, the 'Krisak Samiti' of Banshihari and Itahar organized a anti- eviction movement.⁹

The food crisis was not just an incident of 1959. Its background was started in the precedent years. In 1954, when Dr B C Roy was the Congress chief minister, a massive food crisis overtook the state. There was a near-famine condition in Bengal. An anti-famine committee was then set up, and it organised statewide movements.¹⁰ The crisis started severely since 1956. According to Report, the price of the paddy started to increase from 1956. a vast michhil (procession) was organized for the demand of eradication of food crisis. Approximately, ten thousand people of which five thousand from Tapan, assembled by walking in the front of Balurghat S.D.O. Office.¹¹

The principle demand of the 'Atma Rakshar Andolon Chalao' (Drive Movement for Self-Defence) – the state-wide slogan of the communist parties were : drive campaign against hoarders, freeze stock and sell those in cheap rate to the 'Food Committee': Build up 'Dharmagola' (common granary) in village after village, make co-operative society and encourage the farmers to sell their paddy to food committees, dharmagolas or co-operative societies – drive anti-hoarder campaign among the peasantry class: Drive movement for rationing in every towns and build up 'Relief Kitchen' in every village.¹² According to the above demand charters, the local leaders were guided to organize movements and they also placed a few demands - the principle demand charters of the movement were easy flow of supply of food grains, restriction and decrease of price of the commodities, charitable help etc. At Balurghat, and even in Blocks of the district, the movement was locally organized. The people participated in these locally organized movements spontaneously.¹³

Expansion and Explosion: The food crisis became severe and made people highly miserable during a decade – in the last of the decade of 1950's, the food crisis turned into food movement. As the protest of the killing of 31st August of 1959 in Calcutta, the peasants and share-croppers of Gangarampur organized a vast civil-disobedience deputation in the

⁷ Paschim Dinajpur Jelar Gana-Andolon: Paryalochona O Prekshapat – Mukul Basu, Madhuparni, Paschim Dinajpur Sankhya, P – 211

⁸ Mukul Basu, Madhuparni, Jela Sankha, 1399 B.S.

⁹ Madhuparni, Jela Sankha, 1399 B.S.

¹⁰ People's Democracy, Vol. XXXI, No. 25, 24.6.07

¹¹ Manabesh Choudhury, Madhuparni, 1399 B.S.

¹² Khadya Samkate Amader Kaj (2), Pradeshik Chithi, 3rd October, 1943, Kolkata, Bangiya Pradeshik Committee, C.P.I.

¹³ Paschim Dinajpur Jelar Gana-Andolon: Paryalochona O Prekshapat – Mukul Basu, Madhuparni, Paschim Dinajpur Sankhya, P – 211

front of Circle Office. Kaliagunj and Gangarampur directly organized a tremendous movement. Hundreds of peasants from Kaliagunj were imprisoned to Raigunj and Berhampur Jail. In this regard, it is to be stated that the barbarous incident of the 31st August not happened in the City only, but that practised to the district towns also, the authority had lathi-charged upon the peaceful mass-movement at Burdwan, Berhampore and Gangarampur of West Dinajpur.¹⁴

The incident of Batasan village proved how the food crisis made the people devil-may-care. A bullock-cart of Test-relief was snatched by the women of Batasan village in the way of Kaliagunj to Mudafat village in 1958. The relief – force from B.O.P. Camp besieged the village and made firing which took one person. A vast conference was held in Mahendragunj of Kaliagunj to protest the killing.¹⁵ Another similar incident to be mentioned – the incident of Ambagan of Kaliagunj, where a huge number of people, surprisingly most of them women from Dashia, Machhinagar, Shergram desperately and deliberately broke out the wagon, full of foodstuff and distributed among themselves.¹⁶

The Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee was a mass movement in West Bengal, formed in late 1958 by the Communist Party of India and other left groups, in response to the ongoing food crisis. The PIFRC led one of the most massive and militant political campaigns in the history of West Bengal. The PIFRC demanded total price controls, immediate redistribution of state lands and confiscations without compensation of excessive private lands owned by landlords. The tactics of PIFRC included scouting for hidden rice storages and forced sales of confiscated rice. Food marchers went through at least 100 villages of the district. 50 people were arrested at 24-Paraganas, of which Basirhat and Diamond Harbour being the nerve-centres of agitation. Similar agitation was afoot in West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, Howrah etc.¹⁷ According to the Famine Resistance Committee, the Volunteers of the Food Movement had been imprisoned due to their active participation in demonstration and staging Satyagraha in the various mufasil Courts and Block Development Offices. So many Satyagrahees were imprisoned in the mufasil towns in 7th September of 1959, of which the greater number of imprisonment happened at Balurghat and total number of that was 48 in the District.¹⁸

Table 1

Places / Towns	Total No of Imprisonment
Balurghat	31
Gangarampur	17
Kalimpong	22
Kumargaon (Jalpaiguri)	10
Asansol	19
Berhampore	16
Kandi	10

Sundartala, Amritpur of Kumargunj and Mulia Deshi, a pregnant woman of Madhupur of Kaliagunj always preached the movement with a Chong (Mike) whereas Krishna Mohan Barman, a cycle-messenger and in the same time it is significantly to be stated that he was an old man of Hemtabad, and who regularly had a communication between Hemtabad and Balurghat by a cycle. Sudhin Pandit of Gangarampur, Khoka Roy of Balurghat and Dhairya Barman of Sundartala of Kumargunj actively participated in the movement. The provincial leader in the District, Md. Abdullah Rasul,

¹⁴ Bhumika, Khadya Chai, S.F.I, West Bengal State Committee, 1996, pp – 3-10

¹⁵ Manabesh Choudhury, Paschim Dinajpur Jelar Krisak AndolKatowao12n, Madhuparni, Jela Sankha, 1399 B.S.

¹⁶ Manabesh, op. cit.

¹⁷ The Statesman, 7.8.1959

¹⁸ Swadhinata, 10.9.59

an all India Peasant Leader went to various villages of Tapan as Mirjapur, Bhaiour, Gopalnagar and took an active part to spread the movement.¹⁹

Disposition and Dilemma: Actually, the food crisis was purely man-made. Jotedar-jamindar conspiracy was much powerful in this subdivision: though a slow urbanization was happened, but the majority people were dependent on agrarian activities. The three-tier conspiracy, i.e., 'jotedar-jamindar-moneylender' was so inhumane that was very clear from the contemporary peasant leaders.²⁰

It was the common issues of the then period. A number of severe summer, flood through out the years from 1954 – 1956 gave the opportunity to the dishonest merchants for black marketing. Besides that, the jotedars (land owners) took the advantages of the helpless peasants and share-croppers. The jotedars collected the 'deria-duna' (one and half times) from them for their helplessness. It is to be mentioned in this connection that the peasants and share-croppers organized a havoc movement against them.

Behind the severe food crisis, the only cause – 'hoarders' conspiracy in extreme point'. Though there was scarcity of food production, but this conspiracy of black-marketers supply the fuel of severe food scarcity.

In this connection, the reference of Hoque Ministry may be cited. The Hoque Ministry fixed up the price of rice at Rs. 11 and As. 4 per mound in March of 1943. Hoque Ministry surrendered to the hoarders'-made conspiracy – Government retracted the price-control of rice: the Price of rice, the then, rose to Rs. 20/Maund. In May of the year that rose to Rs. 30-32/Maund. In August, government restricted the price – as a-spot-effect, that reached to Rs. 40 and in many districts it turned into a horror-situation, by which, the price of rice became Rs. 70-80/-. So, from the above, we can see that the Government policy indirectly encouraged the black marketing of rice.²¹ 'The greater danger is the ministerial bungling and administrative corruption add to the miseries of the people and there is greater short coming ineffective distribution and failure to checkmate the profiteers and hoarders'.²²

According to report of Amrit Bazar Patrika, no paddy or rice in many places of Bengal, a vast number of families had spent their days without a little bit of food.²³ Similar news we get from Azad - due to severe scarcity of rice, so many hotels were shut down in Noakhali, so, many people from mufasils for various works had spent their days without food.²⁴

The fact that food crisis of such a magnitude has developed in a year in which there has been a record production of food grains as claimed by the Govt. of India, is the sharpest condemnation of the politics persuaded by, the Central and State Govt. in this respect.²⁵ From the following Table, it is very clear to the district of West Dinajpur. Each kind of rice production, i.e., Aman, Aus and Boro were produced enough more than the previous decades. The total production in 1958-59 was approximately 61% more than the average production of the decade of 1949 – 1958. Not only the rice

¹⁹ Madhuparni, Jela Sankha, 1399

²⁰ Dilip Ghosh Roy, Shahar Kendrik Gana-Andolon: Raigunj Mahakuma, Raigunjer Itihas, Kol. 2008, p -60

²¹ Pradeshik Chithi (Provincial Letter), 3rd October, 1943, Kolkata Bangiya Pradeshik Committee, Communist Party of India, in S. Das & P. Bondopadhyaya, Food Movement of 1959

²² Dainik Basumati, 30.8.59, Editorail

²³ A.B. Patrika, Scarcity of Rice in Market, 6.6.46

²⁴ Azad, 7.6.46

²⁵ New Age, Scarcity and Soaring Price in the Midst of Record Production, 15.8.59, Das & Bondopadhyaya, Food Movement of 1959, p - 93

production, but also the production of Mustard and Burley also increased significantly.²⁶

Production of Some Principal Crops

In 1000 mounds (in 1000 quintals)

Table 2

Crops	Production in 1958-59	Production during 1949-50 – 1958-59
Aman	8,223.2 (,068.9)	5,107.9 (1,906.27)
Aus	1,265.7 (472.36)	778.2 (290.42)
Boro	8.0 (2.99)	1.6 (0.60)
Total Rice	9,496.9 (3,544.24)	5,887.5 (2,197.21)
Mustard	330.2 (123.23)	213.2 (79.57)
Barley	136.6 (50.96)	67.2 (25.08)

On June 2, at the meeting of the West Bengal Food and Relief Advisory Committee, the State's Food Minister admitted the plain fact which could no longer be concealed under a bushel of brave words or of official statistics viz., that the price control in the free market did not work effectively.²⁷

The severest criticism of the government's food policy has come not from politicians belonging to the Opposition Parties alone, but from members of the ruling party itself. Mr. Sen made much of the fact that one crore people through out the state were none getting rice and wheat under the modified rationing system.

The Food Minister had not a word to say about whole-sellers and millers whose anti-social activities have brought about the present food crisis. The duly tangible beneficiary of the Government's Food Policy based on the Price Control Order is the breed of hoarders and profiteers. The government's food policy has met with disastrous failure because they depend too much on help from the centre and too little on self-help.²⁸

However, the District was failed to build up a total-organized movement. It was rather spontaneous and much sporadic. The incident of Batasan village and the incident of Ambagan village were purely sporadic as well as spontaneous. Besides, in these both incidents, the attackers were women in majority. Though one person was killed in the earlier incident and a vast conference was held for that, but no such remarkable district-wide movement had been built up. In Blocks of the district, the movement was locally organized, but not well-organized. The people assembled with huge gatherings spontaneously in such movement, but no plan adopted by the then communist leaders. Mukul Basu was one of the eye witnesses of the movement. According to him, the traditional parameter of the mass-movement was only to support or oppose the leadership of the movement – it was very true in the national perspectives, as well as in state-level and even in regional-scale. This tradition did not break in this district also.²⁹

So, the mass-movement of Balurghat became a sole part of the State-level organization. Most of these movements were mainly conducted by anti-Congress parties.

²⁶ Statistical Abstract, 1959, Govt. of West Bengal, State Statistical Bueau, Cal. 1962 & in Sengupta, Bengal District Gazetteers, West Dinajpur, 1965

²⁷ A.B. Patrika, 22.6.59, on Food Crisis

²⁸ A.B. Patrika, 22.6.1959

²⁹ Mukul Basu, an Eye-witness of the Movement

So, very naturally, majority middle-class people were not the supporters of the opposition parties. And that is why, a vast number of people though participated in the Food Movement, but the movement did not spread all over the society.

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