

Before “Naxalbari”

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[Bengal has a long history of peasant movements. The peasant struggles during 18th and 19th centuries in Bengal found expression in a variety of forms ranging from peaceful agitation to armed struggles. In the early 20th century in large areas of Mymensingh, Jessore, Pabna, 24-Parganas, Burdwan and North Bengal peasant unrest was almost a regular feature. In North Bengal, especially Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa areas of Darjeeling District are no exceptions to this. The present paper is an attempt to focus on the problem of peasant mobilization in pre-Naxalbari days in the context of rural politics. Starting as nationalists they gradually moved to left and extreme left positions and the best example of the latter is the Naxalbari Movement.]

The local jurisdictions of Naxalbari and its adjoining Khoribari and Phansidewa Police Stations were the scenes of a series of movements. These three police stations form the extreme southern tip of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The total area covered by these three police stations is about 274 square miles, with a population of about one lakh and fifty thousand, out of which about fifty thousand are labourers engaged in the 32 tea gardens located within this region. The topography of this area is an admixture of jungles, bushes and tea gardens on a flat landscape. Cultivation is confined to paddy and the yield is average. This area has borders with Nepal, Bangladesh and Bihar. Here the peasants are mostly tribals—Santals, Oraons, and Rajbanshis. These people were exploited by jotedars under the ‘Adhiar System’. The landlords provided seeds, ploughs, and bullocks, in exchange, of which they cultivated the plots and got a share of crops. The peasants were least satisfied with the ‘Adhiar System’ because they felt exploited in the hands of the Jotedars.

The movements of the peasants took place not only over specific issues and demands of the peasants, but also against defective land-tenancy system introduced by the British Indian Government. The formation of an organization of the peasants in 1937 marked a turning point in the history of the peasant movement in Bengal. Between 1937 and the end of the British rule in 1947 peasant revolts and resistance occurred in waves. Under the leadership of Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) the peasants were drawn into struggles which were not only unique in character but had no parallel in the previous history of the peasant movement in Bengal. While previous peasant movements were local and sporadic, the movements led by the BPKS were more sustained, organized and widespread. A large section of the peasants was involved in such movements and they had the support of a large section of the rural people. The style and methods of the protest adopted in these movements were also unprecedented. These were not merely constitutional agitations: these included violent demonstrations, armed insurrections and courting of arrests.

Mahasweta Devi, a renowned social worker and writer, also pointed out in the preface of her novel ‘Agnigarva’ “...the main causes of the grief of these areas are the land owned by the tea garden owners. Here, almost all the labourers are brought from outside. These outsiders had become local settlers with the passage of time. They have always faced severe

exploitation. The tea garden owners had surplus land and they distributed it among the labourers fully loyal to them. The Government witnessing this transaction deliberated over the question of taking over this surplus land, but the plan of doing this was later abandoned. This caused dissatisfaction among the labourers.”

In the mid 1950s these tea garden adhiars began agitating against the tea garden owners. The demand was to bring the surplus land of the tea garden owners within the government control and thereafter the distribution of this surplus land among them. This agitation became violent after 1959. Consequently, tea garden owners drove out the adhiars from the tea gardens and demolished their hutment with elephants. The result was that the peasants and labourers of these areas took up arms against this and protested in an organized manner.

It is a fact that Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa areas of Darjeeling district witnessed continuous peasant movement since 1946. In an article published in 1973 named ‘Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region’, Kanu Sanyal, one of the architects of the peasant movement in the area focused on the various phases of the movement. It was during the Tebhaga movement of 1946 that the bargadars were first drawn into the peasant movement in 1948-50. The Tebhaga movement demanded the reduction of the share of the landowners from half of the produce to one-third. The existing system was that while the peasants cultivated the fields, two thirds of the produce were appropriated by the landlords. The movement spread like wildfire from village to village from Dinajpur district and Rangpur district in North Bengal to 24 Parganas district in the south of the province. Although, primarily launched on economic demands, the rebellion in some areas led to the flight of landlords, leaving the village at the mercy of the peasants, who often turned them into liberated areas administering affairs in the villages through Kisan Sabha.

From 1951 onwards, there was a continuous upsurge of peasant agitation. The Kisan Sabha built up its organization during 1951-54. From 1955 to 1956, the demand for bonus of tea-garden labourers and the peasant movement went on simultaneously. Responding to the call of the BPKS, the Naxalbari Unit carried on the movement for the occupation of the benami land during 1958-62. Naturally, clashes broke out between jotedars and peasants, and about two thousand peasants were arrested in 1958-59. Apparently, the Kisan Sabha carried on a long and patient campaign to woo peasant support. Kanu Sanyal claimed that “these struggles could be organized because there was a leading team of self-sacrificing cadres.”

Until the events of 1966 and 1967, which reached its crescendo with the uprising at Naxalbari, the general belief was that rural India had always been a mass of sleeping villages accepting and acquiescing in every form of injustice and oppression. This belief, contrary to events in history, was nurtured by the preaching of the Indian bourgeois leaders, both during the anti-British movements and after the transfer of power of 1947. Gandhiji highlighted the depressing poverty of the rural masses and recognized the need for including them in the national struggle. Nirmal Kumar Bose, one of Gandhiji’s most brilliant disciples, said that, “the ancient tradition in which people answered hatred by love, anger by calmness, or in other

words, invited self-suffering instead of inflicting suffering and punishment upon other for the vindication of a just cause.... found a new expression.... under the leadership of M K Gandhi.”

The Congress leaders discouraged the militant actions of the peasantry. Naturally, violent expressions of the protest by the peasants were under-played in official histories of the national movement. Conflicts between the feudal landlords and the peasants were ignored and harmonizing aspects of the rural tradition were upheld. The ideal view of the panchayat as a concord of all rural classes was counter-posed against the grim reality of class antagonism in the villages.

In 1974, Kanu Sanyal gave an account of the background to the Naxalbari peasant uprising. He also indicated the beginnings of his differences with Charu Majumdar and provided the basic theoretical scaffold to the movement. According to Mr Sanyal, the communists of North Bengal built up the peasants' organization in Naxalbari during 1951 and 1954 by fighting against the petty oppressive acts of the jotedars. Later, between 1955 and 1957, the tea-garden workers were organized and rallied along with the peasants. In 1958-62, the Naxalbari movement embarked on a more militant phase when the peasants' organization under the leadership of the communists gave the call for the harvesting of crops and their collection by the tillers, hoisting of red flags in their respective fields, arming of the peasants for the protection of their crops and defence against police attacks.

Dr A P Mukherjee, the then Superintendent of Police, Darjeeling District, and a noted academician raised the issue of unsatisfactory land settlement behind the peasant unrest. He suggested to a cabinet committee “...to induce sincere and emergent administrative measures to look into the alleged unsatisfactory land settlement operations in the affected areas and also into the alleged misappropriation of vested lands by certain jotedars and also into the prevalence of benami lands as well as eviction of bargadars.....” He added, “In the first place, we must be morally, and not simply legally, convinced that a sincere attempt has been made to sort out the alleged misgivings of a section of the agitated peasantry. Any police officer who has had occasion to serve in rural areas knows only too well that the majority of the cases of the murder and deadly rioting in the rural areas primarily originate from our unsatisfactory land tenure system and land settlement administration...”

In the pre-Naxalbari peasant movements women played a vital role. Before the Naxalbari uprising many women were connected with peasant organizations. Prominent among them was Galeswari Devi. Since 1955 she had been a member of Krishak Samity. From that time onwards until her death, she went on fighting against the rowdies of the landlords. She had 20 bighas of land of her own and she fought many a legal battle against Tinkadi Kundu of Siliguri in connection with her land ownership. She had to tackle a series of police vandalism. As a leader of Krishak Samity of Hatighisa she had conducted many agitations. During the Naxalbari movement her house was used as a centre of liaison. The activities and the programmes of the leaders like Shanti Munda, Lila Majumdar (wife of Charu Majumdar) and many others set an example and imparted courage to them. These women were active members of women's wing

of the Communist Party of India (CPI). The ultra left leadership of the Mahila Samity comprised the mothers of Jangal Santhal and Babulal Biswakarmokar, Barki Devi, Galeswari Tharu, Leela Majumdar and many others. These women traversed villages in processions with their supporters carrying red flags in their hands. From her teenage days, Shanti Munda, also known as Lungi Munda, engaged herself in the task of convincing women about the legitimacy of the struggle to occupy excess lands owned by jotedars, about unequal distribution of crops and other inequities. Later, she actively participated in the Naxalbari movement of 1967. It is pertinent to mention here, that among the women who participated in the armed peasant struggle of Naxalbari, she is the one of the few who survives till this day.

In September 1966, during the 16-day strike in the tea plantations, the ground was prepared for the peasants' uprising. At the beginning of 1967, the Siliguri sub-division peasant convention gave a call to –

- i) establish the authority of the peasant committees to tackle all villages in all village matters ;
- ii) get organized and be armed in order to crush the resistance of jotedars and rural reactionaries ;
- iii) smash the jotedars' monopoly of ownership of the land and redistribute the land through the peasant committees. The convention further concluded that the peasant struggle against feudalism would have to face the repression of all reactionaries. Suniti Kumar Ghosh, a veteran communist and an academic wrote in his book 'Naxalbari : Before and After' that "the peasants of Terai.... swept into the dust the political, economic and social authority, dignity and prestige built up in the villages by the landlords and jotedars, who represent feudalism, and established the rule of the peasant committees in the villages through their armed revolt."

In the meantime, in the 1967 assembly polls in West Bengal the Left Parties came out with flying colours with convincing majority and formed the 14-Party United Front Government. The United Front ministry tried to arrest the peasant movement which was taking the form of forcible occupation of land in the Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa areas. Harekrishna Konar, the new Land and Land Revenue Minister and a Veteran CPI(M) peasant leader came to Siliguri, spoke to Kanu Sanyal and announced a policy of quick distribution of surplus land among the landless and stoppage of eviction of sharecroppers. Later in may 1967, in an interview to his party's Bengali mouthpiece 'Ganashakti' he said that the government had decided to distribute land among the landless and the poor peasants based on consultation with the members of gram panchyat, representatives of Kisan Sabha, legislators and anchal pradhans. However, the agitating peasants refused this proposal on two grounds: First, while Harekrishna Konar promised to distribute the land, he was not sure about the method of recovering the land transferred malafide by the landlords. He admitted in the same interview that regarding benami (malafide) transfers, the government had not yet been able to take any decision. Second, the demonstrating peasants also began to realize that the landlords, who were in possession of surplus land, could always take the help of the law to delay the seizure of their land and thus postpone for an indefinite period the distribution of the surplus land.

Thus, the Siliguri unit of CPI(M) (Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa falls under Siliguri Sub-division of Darjeeling District) chose to reject this proposals and continued the movement. The movement became violent and finally set an example for militant activities, which was

unprecedented in the history of organized peasant movements in West Bengal. In short, it may be summed up that the pre-Naxalbari peasant unrest prepared the stage for Naxalbari uprising. It was a movement of the agricultural and tea garden workers and their militant organization in some areas of North Bengal. Its success may have been limited but it still serves as an inspiration for agrarian movements in India. □□□