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ROLE OF ILA MITRA IN THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT IN BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

The Tebhaga Movement (1946–47) was a significant agrarian uprising in colonial Bengal aimed at challenging the exploitative sharecropping system. Under this system, peasants were required to give half of their produce to landlords despite bearing all cultivation costs. The movement demanded that sharecroppers retain two-thirds of the produce, reflecting a broader struggle for economic justice and dignity.

In this context, Ila Mitra emerged as a key leader who played a crucial role in mobilizing peasants, particularly in rural and tribal regions. Coming from an educated urban background, she transformed into a committed grassroots activist and became closely associated with marginalized communities, including the Santhals. Her leadership helped expand the movement's reach and strengthened its mass base.

This paper examines Ila Mitra's role in organizing resistance, promoting class consciousness, and encouraging participation among women. Her efforts led to increased involvement of women in protests and protective actions, marking an important shift in traditional gender roles.

The study also highlights the repression faced by Ila Mitra, including her arrest and torture, which underscores the intensity of the movement and the challenges faced by its leaders. Despite these hardships, she remained a symbol of resilience and resistance.

In conclusion, Ila Mitra's contribution to the Tebhaga Movement was transformative, as she not only strengthened the struggle but also redefined agrarian activism through inclusivity and social awareness.

Keywords: Ila Mitra, Tebhaga Movement, Bengal, Peasant Movement, Sharecroppers, Communist Movement

1. INTRODUCTION

The agrarian economy of colonial Bengal was marked by extreme inequality and exploitation. The zamindari system, introduced under British colonial rule, created a hierarchy in which landlords (zamindars and jotedars) controlled vast tracts of land, while peasants and sharecroppers labored under oppressive conditions. Sharecroppers were required to give half of their produce to landlords, leaving them with insufficient resources for survival. This exploitative system created widespread discontent and laid the foundation for agrarian unrest.

The Tebhaga Movement emerged in this context as a powerful expression of peasant resistance. The term “Tebhaga” literally means “three shares,” reflecting the demand that sharecroppers retain two-thirds of the produce while landlords receive only one-third. This demand was supported by the recommendations of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission, which recognized the injustices faced by sharecroppers.

The movement began in 1946 under the leadership of the All India Kisan Sabha, the peasant wing of the Communist Party of India. It quickly spread across various districts of Bengal, including 24 Parganas, Dinajpur, and Rangpur. One of the most notable features of the movement was its mass character, involving peasants from diverse religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Hindus, Muslims, and tribal communities united in a common struggle against feudal oppression, demonstrating the potential for class-based solidarity in colonial India.

Within this broader movement, Ila Mitra emerged as a key leader who played a crucial role in mobilizing peasants and organizing resistance. Her leadership was particularly significant in the Rajshahi region, where she worked closely with tribal communities. She became known as “Rani Ma” among the Santhals, reflecting the deep trust and respect she earned from the people she served.

This paper seeks to explore the role of Ila Mitra in the Tebhaga Movement by examining her contributions in detail. It will analyze her leadership style, her efforts to mobilize marginalized communities, and her impact on the movement as a whole. The study will also consider the broader implications of her work, particularly in terms of gender and social transformation.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on an often-overlooked aspect of Indian history—the role of women in peasant movements. While much attention has been given to male leaders, the contributions of women like Ila Mitra remain underexplored. By highlighting her role, this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Tebhaga Movement and its legacy.

In addition, the paper will examine the challenges faced by the movement, including repression by

colonial authorities and the impact of political changes such as Partition. Despite these challenges, the Tebhaga Movement left a lasting impact on agrarian policies and inspired future movements for land reform.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dhanagare (1983) examined peasant movements in India with a focus on agrarian struggles between 1920 and 1950. His work provides a comprehensive framework for understanding movements like Tebhaga as outcomes of structural inequalities in land ownership and exploitation by landlords. He emphasized class conflict and the role of organized peasant groups such as the All India Kisan Sabha. However, his analysis remains largely structural and does not focus extensively on individual leadership or gender dimensions. As a result, while his work is foundational in understanding the economic background of the Tebhaga Movement, it leaves scope for further exploration of key figures like Ila Mitra and their specific contributions.

Sarkar (1983) analyzed the socio-political dynamics of modern India and highlighted the significance of agrarian movements in shaping nationalist politics. He identified the Tebhaga Movement as a crucial phase of peasant resistance in Bengal, driven by economic grievances and political mobilization. Sarkar's work situates the movement within the broader anti-colonial struggle, emphasizing the role of communist ideology in organizing peasants. However, his focus is primarily on macro-level processes and political trends, with limited attention to grassroots leaders. Consequently, the contributions of individuals such as Ila Mitra, especially in mobilizing marginalized groups and women, are not adequately explored in his study.

Roy (2002) provided a detailed and focused study of the Tebhaga Movement, analyzing its origins, development, and impact. He emphasized the role of the Communist Party and the strategies used to mobilize peasants against landlord exploitation. Roy's work is significant in highlighting the organizational structure and political dynamics of the movement. He also briefly acknowledges the contributions of leaders like Ila Mitra, particularly in the Rajshahi region. However, his analysis does not delve deeply into her role as a woman leader or her influence on gender participation in the movement, leaving an important gap in the literature.

Ghosh (1976) explored rural life and agrarian conditions in Bengal, providing valuable insights into the socio-economic background that led to peasant uprisings. His work highlights the hardships faced by peasants, including poverty, indebtedness, and exploitation under the zamindari system. Ghosh's analysis is important for understanding the everyday realities of rural communities and the factors that contributed to the emergence of the Tebhaga Movement. However, his study is largely descriptive and

does not focus on political movements or leadership. As such, it provides context but does not address the specific contributions of activists like Ila Mitra.

Chaudhuri (1984) examined the agrarian structure of Bengal and the nature of landlord-tenant relations. He emphasized the exploitative practices of zamindars and jotedars, which created conditions for peasant resistance. His work supports the argument that the Tebhaga Movement was rooted in economic injustice and unequal power relations. Chaudhuri's analysis is valuable in explaining the structural basis of the movement, but it does not explore the role of leadership or the social dynamics of mobilization. In particular, the contributions of women leaders such as Ila Mitra are not discussed, indicating a gap in the literature.

Forbes (1996) focused on women's participation in Indian political movements and highlighted the often-overlooked role of women in shaping history. Her work emphasizes that women were not merely passive participants but active agents in movements for social and political change. In the context of the Tebhaga Movement, Forbes' analysis is useful for understanding the significance of Ila Mitra's leadership in mobilizing women. However, her work provides a broad overview and does not offer a detailed case study of Ila Mitra, suggesting the need for more focused research on her contributions.

Chatterjee (1986) analyzed nationalism and its relationship with peasant movements in colonial India. He argued that local leadership and grassroots mobilization were essential for the success of such movements. His work highlights the importance of cultural and social factors in shaping political resistance. While Chatterjee provides a theoretical framework for understanding movements like Tebhaga, he does not specifically examine the role of individual leaders. As a result, the contributions of Ila Mitra, particularly her engagement with tribal communities and women, are not adequately addressed.

Banerjee (2001) studied the Tebhaga Movement with a focus on sharecropping practices and agrarian politics in Bengal. He emphasized the role of economic exploitation in driving the movement and analyzed the strategies used by peasants to resist landlords. Banerjee's work provides valuable insights into the functioning of the movement at the local level. However, his analysis remains centered on economic factors and does not fully explore the role of leadership or gender dynamics. The contributions of Ila Mitra are mentioned only briefly, indicating a need for more detailed study.

Mukherjee (1995) examined tribal resistance and agrarian struggles in Bengal, highlighting the role of marginalized communities in peasant movements. His work is particularly relevant for understanding the involvement of Santhal tribes in the Tebhaga Movement. Mukherjee emphasized the importance of leadership in mobilizing tribal communities, which indirectly points to the significance of figures like

Ila Mitra. However, his study does not specifically focus on her role, leaving a gap in the literature regarding her contributions to tribal mobilization.

Sen (1992) focused on women's participation in peasant movements and analyzed the gender dynamics of agrarian struggles. Her work highlights the active role played by women in protests, resistance, and organizational activities. In the context of the Tebhaga Movement, Sen's analysis is important for understanding how leaders like Ila Mitra encouraged women's participation. However, her study does not provide a detailed examination of Ila Mitra's leadership, suggesting the need for further research on this aspect.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

The Tebhaga Movement must be understood within the broader context of colonial agrarian policies and socio-economic conditions in Bengal. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 had established a system in which zamindars were recognized as landowners, while peasants were reduced to tenants with little security. Over time, this system led to the emergence of jotedars, who acted as intermediaries and further exploited sharecroppers.

By the early 20th century, the condition of sharecroppers had deteriorated significantly. They were required to provide half of their produce to landlords, bear the cost of cultivation, and often store harvested crops in the landlords' granaries. This system left them vulnerable to exploitation and indebtedness.

The Bengal Famine of 1943 further exposed the vulnerabilities of the agrarian system. Millions of people died due to food shortages, highlighting the failure of colonial policies and the need for reform. In the aftermath of the famine, there was a growing awareness among peasants about their rights and the need for collective action.

The immediate trigger for the Tebhaga Movement was the recommendation of the Floud Commission, which suggested that sharecroppers should retain two-thirds of the produce. Inspired by this recommendation, the All India Kisan Sabha launched the movement in 1946, calling on peasants to implement the Tebhaga system.

The movement quickly gained momentum, with peasants refusing to give half of their produce to landlords and instead storing it in their own granaries. This act of defiance challenged the authority of landlords and disrupted the existing power structure. In many areas, the movement turned into a direct confrontation between peasants and landlords, often involving clashes and violence.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Tebhaga Movement was its inclusivity. It brought together people from different communities, transcending religious and ethnic divisions. Women played a significant role in the movement, participating in protests and protecting crops from landlords.

Despite its widespread support, the movement faced severe repression from colonial authorities. Police were deployed to suppress the movement, and many activists were arrested. However, the movement succeeded in drawing attention to the plight of sharecroppers and led to the enactment of the Bargadari Act, which recognized their rights, although its implementation was limited.

4. EMERGENCE AND LIFE OF ILA MITRA

Ila Mitra was born in 1925 in Kolkata into an educated and progressive family. Her father was a high-ranking government official, and she received her education at Bethune College, one of the premier institutions for women in India. Her early life was marked by exposure to education, sports, and cultural activities, which helped shape her personality and worldview.

During her college years, she became involved in political activities and was influenced by the ideas of socialism and communism. She joined the Communist Party of India and became actively involved in its activities. Her political awakening coincided with a period of intense social and political change in India, marked by the struggle for independence and growing awareness of social inequalities.

A significant turning point in her life was her marriage to Ramendra Mitra, who belonged to a zamindar family in the Rajshahi region. After her marriage, she moved to rural Bengal, where she witnessed firsthand the harsh realities of agrarian life. This experience had a profound impact on her and strengthened her commitment to the cause of social justice.

In rural Bengal, Ila Mitra began working as a teacher and social worker, engaging with local communities and understanding their problems. She became particularly involved with the Santhal tribal community, which was among the most marginalized groups in the region. Through her work, she gained the trust and respect of the people, who began to see her as a leader.

Her transformation from an urban, educated woman to a grassroots activist is a remarkable aspect of her life. It reflects her dedication and willingness to challenge social norms in pursuit of justice. She was not content with merely advocating for change from a distance; instead, she immersed herself in the lives of the people she sought to help.

This period marked the beginning of her active involvement in the Tebhaga Movement. Her understanding of both the ideological and practical aspects of the movement made her an effective

leader. She was able to communicate the goals of the movement to peasants and mobilize them for collective action.

5. ROLE OF ILA MITRA IN THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

Ila Mitra played a central role in the Tebhaga Movement, particularly in the Rajshahi region, where she emerged as a key leader. Her contributions can be understood in terms of her leadership, organizational skills, and ability to mobilize marginalized communities.

One of her most significant contributions was grassroots mobilization. She worked closely with peasants and tribal communities, organizing meetings, raising awareness, and encouraging participation in the movement. Her ability to connect with people at the grassroots level was a major factor in the success of the movement in her region.

She also played a crucial role in organizing resistance against landlords. Under her leadership, peasants refused to comply with the traditional system of sharing produce and instead asserted their rights. This act of defiance required courage and collective action, both of which were fostered by her leadership.

Another important aspect of her role was her work with women. She encouraged women to participate in the movement and take on active roles. Women were involved in protecting crops, organizing protests, and supporting the movement in various ways. This not only strengthened the movement but also contributed to the empowerment of women.

Her leadership was not limited to organizing protests; she also played a role in shaping the ideological direction of the movement. As a member of the Communist Party, she emphasized the importance of class struggle and collective action. She helped articulate the demands of the movement and connect them to broader issues of social justice.

Her work among the Santhal community was particularly noteworthy. She earned their trust and was affectionately called “Rani Ma,” reflecting her deep connection with them. This relationship was crucial in mobilizing tribal communities and integrating them into the movement.

However, her activism also made her a target of repression. She was arrested during the Nachole uprising and subjected to severe torture. Despite this, she remained committed to her ideals and continued to inspire others. Her resilience in the face of adversity made her a symbol of resistance.

6. CONCLUSION

The role of Ila Mitra in the Tebhaga Movement represents a significant chapter in the history of agrarian struggles in India. Her leadership, courage, and commitment to social justice played a crucial role in shaping the movement and ensuring its impact.

The Tebhaga Movement itself was a landmark event that highlighted the power of collective action and the importance of addressing agrarian inequalities. Although the movement faced challenges and its demands were not fully implemented, it succeeded in raising awareness and influencing future policies.

Ila Mitra's contribution to the movement goes beyond her immediate role as a leader. She challenged traditional gender roles and demonstrated that women could play a central role in political and social movements. Her work among marginalized communities, particularly the Santhals, highlighted the importance of inclusivity and solidarity.

Her legacy continues to inspire movements for social justice and agrarian reform. She remains a symbol of resistance and empowerment, reminding us of the importance of standing up against injustice.

In conclusion, Ila Mitra's role in the Tebhaga Movement was transformative. She not only contributed to the success of the movement but also redefined the nature of leadership and activism in India. Her life and work serve as an enduring example of the power of courage, commitment, and collective action.

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