



When Peasant Women Arose

The history we read tells us very little of what women were doing during the evolution of “mankind”. We hear of an occasional Nur Jehan or Lakshmibai but what of the millions of ordinary women – how did they live, work and struggle ? Women have always participated in social and political movements but their role has been relegated at best to the footnotes of history. In this column, we will present studies being conducted by feminists the world over, into women’s history. We hope that questions arising from these studies will help us understand better our predicament today, and the ways to change it.

This study of the Tebhaga movement raises important questions not only about the forms of women’s organizations and their relationship to mass movements, but also about the factors which militate against women’s participation in social, political movements.

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The Tebhaga Movement was an upsurge by sharecropping peasants in Bengal during 1946-50. These peasants cultivated the land with their own cattle, implements and seed – yet they got only half the crop because they did not own the land. The landlord often took even more than the half which was his share, because the peasants were so heavily indebted to him. The economic depression of the 1930s and the terrible famine of 1943-44 were disastrous, particularly for these poor and most exploited sharecropping peasants.

The Kisan Sabhas – peasant fronts of the undivided Communist Party of India – organized and led the sharecroppers’ struggle for two-thirds of the crop cultivated by them. This demand was only a beginning. The movement went on to question the entire system of land-relations whereby those who tilled the land were robbed of the fruits of their labour by idle landowners. “Langol Jar Jami Tar” (Land to the Tiller) was one of the key slogans. Inevitably, this struggle of the poor peasants got linked to the national movement: it attacked the rulers who upheld the exploitative zamindari system. “Expel the British” became another war-cry. Soon the movement came to vibrate with the vision of a free and equal society : “Establish worker – peasant states.”

Taking Two-thirds

In the 1946 harvesting seasons, and in later harvesting seasons, the sharecroppers, instead of taking the paddy to the landlord’s Khamar (threshing floor) began to take it all either to their own Khamars or to those set up by the Kisan Sabhas. The landlord was called there to receive his share. In some areas, the peasants managed to take two-thirds; in others, they got 60 per cent of the crop.

Rural Bengal was in ferment. The movement spread – even

where threshing had been completed at the landlords’ Khamar, the sharecropper burst into his Gola (grainstore) and took Tebhaga. Terrified landlords filed cases of theft against Kisan Sabha leaders and called the police to their aid. The peasants resisted arrest, and over 50 were killed in police firings.

Tebhaga Elaka – Towards A New Society

In some areas, the movement was so strong that landlords were forced to retreat to the towns. The peasants took complete control of these areas. They elected peasant committees to look after village administration, and formed volunteer troops to put the committees’ decisions into action and to guard the area against police and landlords’ goondas. They also set up their own police’s courts.

Women In the Forefront

Since women not only constitute half the peasantry, but also bear the brunt of poverty and exploitation, their participation in the movement gave it greater strength and militancy. They were active at all levels. They harvested the crop collectively under the Red Flag; they took part in meetings and demonstrations; they went on delegations to landlords.

In the course of the movement, women realized the need for self-organization. Nari Bahinis (women volunteers) armed with daa and gayan (agricultural implements) guarded the villages at night. In Kakdwip and Hajong where there was armed struggle against landlords, police and military, women took up arms. In Kakdwip, they were trained by the wife of an ex-INA officer.

Women were often responsible for the communication network between different units. They carried messages from one district committee to another, and on their way to market or while visiting relatives, passed on the word about meetings.

We want two-thirds not half. Central slogan of the movement

They often operated the warning system – sounding conch shells, bells, bugles or drums when police entered the village. This was the signal for people from neighbouring villages to gather and face the police while the Kisan Sabha leaders escaped arrest. As the Government cracked down harder on the ‘liberated zones’, women’s work of warning and information became very crucial.

Women showed amazing dedication and generosity in sheltering Kisan Sabha activists. Stories are still told in the villages – how one woman walked miles to warn a leader of police searches, another hid an activist in purdah; how they risked arrest to help party cadres, not eating so that a comrade might eat. Women fought with incredible heroism to rescue people from police custody. They gheraoed the police, disarmed them and fought them using brooms, knives, axes, husking tools, even chilli powder.

In Birgunj, Phuleswari, armed with a broom, led the peasants in a daylong gherao of a police party. In Rampur, a woman led the peasants to gherao a policeman and break his rifle. She refused to free him without the party directive. In Hation, women prevented the police from taking away arrested men, by dragging the police boat ashore. Because of their militancy, many of those killed in firings were women.

In 1948 in Lalgunj, police raided the Kisan Sabha office. Three women chased and surrounded them. The police opened fire, killing Sarojini and Batasi. Ahulya who was eight months pregnant, died a heroic death – her womb was slashed open by a bayonet. The fists of her unborn child held out to the world, she fought on until she died.

Raising Their Own Issues

Through struggle against social and economic oppression by landlords women realized the need to fight other kinds of oppression which they had hitherto considered ‘personal’. They now needed more urgently to fight these forms of oppression by their men and families, because they were acting as barriers to their free participation in the struggle.

In the ‘liberated zones’, controlled by Kisan Sabhas, women began to bring cases of wife-beating, discrimination and molestation to the people’s courts. Wife-beating, especially by drunken husbands, was common. In Harpur, a party cadre went to inform a woman of a meeting, found her alone and attempted to rape her. The people’s court ordered him to leave the area within 24 hours. In such situations, women’s groups would see that the court verdict was carried out and the offender was socially boycotted.

The women had gained confidence and strength – men were forced to respect their participation in the struggle. They also began learning to read and write. They discussed questions like : “What are our rights?” and “What is Communism?” Through actively fighting against one form of inequality – the economic, they learnt to challenge another – that based on sex.

What Went Before

Before the Tebhaga Movement, the Communist Party had attempted to organize women. The *Mohila Atma Raksha Samiti* or Women’s Self Defence Society had been formed in Calcutta. It was active from 1942 onwards – spreading anti-fascist propaganda and doing air raid prevention work. The women went into the villages and set up relief centers during the famine. They had literacy and training programmes for destitute women, hundreds of whom were being driven to prostitution. Women’s discussion groups raised the question of women’s right to control their own income.

However, the active women in these organizations were mostly mothers, wives and sisters of men who were Communist Party or Kisan Sabha members. Even these women often faced family opposition because many men supposed to be communists had very traditional views regarding women. These women were mostly students, or from middle class urban and rich or middle peasant backgrounds. Very poor women were at the receiving end. They were usually too overworked in the fields and the house, and had to attend meetings by cutting down on their brief rest periods.

How did these same poor, landless women who had little time or interest for meetings, become so active during the Tebhaga struggle ? One reason was that the demand for two-thirds affected them directly. Almost all the women of poor, sharecropping families work in the fields so it was *their* crop into which they had put their labour, and the demand was as much theirs as that of the men.

In the earlier hat-tola peasant movement, aimed at reducing taxes paid to leaseholders of rural markets, rich peasants had taken the lead. Since the rich peasants bought and sold more, they had more to gain by the reduction of tax. Therefore, poor peasants had not been in the vanguard of that movement and the poor peasant women had attended meetings and demonstrations, but not taken an active part. The women from rich peasant families did not usually work outside the house. They were more secluded and would only support but not actively participate in the struggle. They would hesitate to speak at open meetings. The poor peasant women had a relatively better status in their families because they were earners, and could exert more pressure on their own men, to get their protests heard. Even becoming members of the *Mohila Atma Raksha Samiti* did not improve the status of the rich peasant women in their homes and families.

Another factor which made it easier for the poor peasant women to participate was the intensity of the Tebhaga struggle. Under normal circumstances, women find it difficult to take part in political and social activity, because of the heavy burden of domestic work, and the demands of their husbands at home. But with so much turmoil in the village, the whole routine of life was disrupted, and men would not make so many demands of the women.

Also, the action to be taken was much more immediate and less planned. In a planned demonstration. For instance, men would be likely to take the lead and tell women when to come and what to do. When the village had to be defended and resistance put up without much prior notice, and with improvised weapons, everyone who could do the work well was free to do it. The movement needed every pair of hands and every mind working in unison, if it was to survive.

More Militant Than Men

Many people have stressed again and again that the women were more militant than the men – because they were doubly exploited. Even among women, the most oppressed – widows, like Dipsari in Dinajpur – often became leaders. In Mymensingh and 24 Parganas, where the movement was most intense, Muslim women came out of purdah.

During this period, there were communal riots in many parts of Bengal, such as Noakhali. But Hindu and Muslim poor peasants were united in the Tebhaga struggle. They even ate together: poor peasant women from all communities fed Hindu, Muslim and tribal leaders. Muslim women found it easier to hide activists inside purdah and did not hesitate to do so.

The *Mohila Atma Raksha Samiti* did support the struggle. They encouraged women to come out. They held political education classes and helped the women raise their own demands in the people's courts. For example, women in Kakdwip, who used to do unpaid domestic work in landlords' houses, began to demand wages and fixed hours of work. When their men tried to force them to continue working unpaid, the *Mohila Atma Raksha Samiti* raised the issue in the village court.

But during the movement, not *Mohila Atma Raksha Samiti*, but **scheduled caste and tribal women of all ages, many of**

them widows, took the lead. The nature of leadership had changed – instead of speaking at meetings and organizing relief, it was now organizing village patrols and fighting groups. In this way, the women worked together, the urban activists helping in organization, guidance and political education, and the poor peasant women taking the lead in organizing themselves.

Back To Homes

The movement was finally crushed after Independence. The Communist Party and *Mohila Atma Raksha Samiti* were banned from 1948-51, and the activists were forced to go underground. The women who had been so active at village level, did play a big role in demanding the release of those arrested and punishment of police and landlords who had molested women or been responsible for murders. But gradually, the involvement of poor peasant women declined drastically. Their own organizations had been smashed and the Communist Party, even when it did later try to organize women, went back to its old policy of keeping them on the fringes of political activity. They were once again involved in supporting political decisions or doing social work.

It was only in the revolutionary atmosphere when landlords were driven out of villages and the whole social structure seemed to be undergoing an upheaval, that women had been able to challenge all structures of power and control, including the power of their own men over them.

Yet it is significant that women were rarely members of the elected or nominated village committees set up by Kisan Sabhas, that is, even their great dedication in the struggle was not given recognition, and they could only raise women's issues like wife-beating, by organizing themselves in women's groups. □