



Bimala Maji

Women's Role In The Tebhaga Movement

-An Interview With Bimala Maji

In Manushi No. 3, we had published an article on the Tebhaga movement, entitled "When Peasant Women Arose" Here, Bimala Maji, who was one of the participants in that movement, gives her version of events during that period. This interview is part of a whole series of interviews conducted by the author. We hope, that the different accounts given by various participants will help build a more comprehensive picture of the movement.

BENGAL has a history of rural resistance, continuing throughout the whole period of British colonial rule. The Tebhaga uprising in many ways was the culminating point, spreading over large areas of the countryside and expressing the urge of labouring men and women to be liberated from exploitation. A reported 6,000,000 people participated in the Tebhaga movement at its peak.

The issue around which the campaign was launched was an economic one and did not concern the specific interests of women. In September 1946, less than a year before the partition of Bengal by the British, the provincial Kisan Sabha, or peasants' association, which was guided by the Communist Party, decided to initiate, on an experimental basis, a struggle for two thirds of the harvest.

This demand had figured since the thirties in the programme of the Kisan Sabha, and had also been recognised as just by a government commission which in 1939-1940 had reviewed the miserable state of Bengal's agriculture. Even this British appointed commission, the Floud Commission, had exposed the prevailing system which obliged sharecroppers to relinquish half of their harvest as rent, and

on top of that to pay scores of illegal cesses. These sharecroppers were continuously drained of the wealth they produced.

The movement started during a crucial time of the year, in November, when the *aman* paddy is harvested. After the staging of gatherings and demonstrations with sticks and red flags, to arouse mass enthusiasm, batches of Kisan Sabha volunteers joined individual share-croppers to cut and stack the paddy crops on the peasants' threshing floors. A challenge thus was posed to the existing rule that all harvested paddy be delivered at the landlord's *cutchery* or granary. From pocket areas where people's consciousness was relatively high due to earlier campaigns by the Kisan Sabha, the Tebhaga movement in no time swept through the countryside like an avalanche, notably in northern Bengal.

During the second stage of the uprising, therefore, the experimental limits set by the leadership at the start were broken by the people themselves. Peasant men and women, many of them Muslims, attacked the granaries of local land-lords or *jotedars*, to recover stocks of paddy already stored there. The rural structure of oppression was truly shaking, as many landlords fled the villages, some of them disguised in women's clothes.

Coinciding with the partially

spontaneous nature of the uprising was the principal role that women played in it. Even in areas such as the interior villages of Nandigram, where women were not supposed to participate in cultivation in the field and where their agricultural tasks were largely "limited" to processing the harvested paddy, women had definite stakes in the success of the Tebhaga campaign. Even more so than their husbands, rural poor women had suffered heavily, inhumanly, from the recent *man* made disaster, the Bengal famine of 1943. For these women, the storing of paddy in their own houses, for the first time in their lives, was a revolutionary event. It evoked a tremendous emotional response.

It, therefore, is no accident that rural poor women in massive numbers came forward to defend the movement's gains. When the colonial state, befriending the landlords, unleashed terror and intimidation to crush the movement, women throughout Bengal put up fierce resistance against police raids. From the forested area of Sunderbans in the South through the Norail subdivision in Jessore to Dinajpur in the north, village women spontaneously set up their Nari Bahini or semimilitia groups, facing rifles with brooms, pestles and knives. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to state that in this towering political event, rural poor women played the leading part.

Further, that women took this step on their own initiative is a very significant fact. The Communist Party to an extent had promoted the politicisation of women through the Women's Self Defence League. This front, led by urban middle class women, had, from 1942 on, very successfully organised and mobilised both in towns and villages of Bengal. Without such preparatory work, women might not have emerged in their vanguard role. However, when, in early 1947, State repression had to be countered, the provincial party leadership, in contrast to the rural poor women, wavered and hesitated. It refused to take up the gun as people demanded, and it certainly did not propagate the building of women's militia.

The experience of Tebhaga thus needs to be summed up in view of this contradiction. The women of Tebhaga demonstrated their capacity to provide leadership, and they did so partly in spite of the Communist Party's policy. However short-lived the uprising may have been, through their practice, the rural poor women of Bengal posed a challenge to traditional concepts of liberation which still relegate women to a secondary role. Let us, therefore, listen carefully to what female participants of Tebhaga have to say about their former experience.

This is a personal account by Bimala Maji who, for some time, functioned as the chief organiser in the Nandigram area of Midnapur district. The interview, first, shows the enormous creativity which rural poor women displayed during the Tebhaga rising. They not only operated the warning system and were most vigilant against police raids on their homesteads but, in spite of lack of experience, also devised various inventive means to divert the attention of the police and to protect cadres targeted for arrest.

Second, the prominent role of women in the struggles of Nandigram is all the more remarkable, since this was an area deeply infested with feudalism, an area where patriarchal customs were exceedingly strong. As Bimala recalls, the women of Nandigram initially remained speechless even amongst themselves.

They procrastinated in front of their sister organiser and all of them, Muslims and Hindus alike, were deeply oppressed by the *parda* system. Yet, within a short period after Bimala had started mobilising here, these women emerged to take part in the battle for an increased share of the paddy harvest.

Lastly, and this is perhaps the most striking in the rather specific experience of Nandigram, it apparently was exclusively the women who, armed with red flags, brooms and spicy powders, here initiated the task of harvesting the paddy. Women broke both with traditional obligations to the landlords and with the fixed, sexual division of labour, as they marched to the fields to harvest the paddy. Women's boldness in throwing off



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shackling traditions could not have been demonstrated more forcefully.



"I was born in a middle peasant family. My father used to work together with big Congress leaders like Kumar Jana and Biren Sasmol. My older brother, however, was active for the Communist Party. We watched when he invited party comrades to eat and discuss at our home.

I was married off at the age of 13 or 14. The house of my parents-in-law was a dacoits' house. Police often used to visit it and were offered big amounts of clarified butter, goat meat, and so on. In other words, they shared in the dacoits' booty !

Because of the superstitions prevailing in my parents-in-laws' house I got no education whatsoever. They did not even allow me to write to my parents. So, repression in the home was enormous. If any outsider saw me and my in-laws noticed this, I would be beaten up badly. So I used to ponder day and night: "I will be able to survive only if this man, my husband, dies."

In fact, my parents-in-law and my husband did die ! As the family was very rich, owning about 100 *bighas* of land, I inherited a lot of property. But I was so happy about my husband's death that I did not bother about the properties right away.

Coincidentally, I happened to be staying at my parents' home on the day my husband died. I went back only three days later. My sister-in-law then claimed all the property. When I consulted a lawyer, I was advised : "It is your right to possess the property. If you want, you can let the others share in it." So I instituted a court case which lasted for nine to 10 years. Meanwhile, widows used to visit me when their fathers-in-law grabbed their property. They used to tell me : "You know the truth. What will you do for us ?"

Ultimately, the case against my in-laws was withdrawn by us after a lot of harassment meted out to me. For example, my in-laws took me to Calcutta "to enjoy *puja*" but then kept me locked up for four days, while they themselves went out to join the celebrations. My father, who played an active role in the court case, was given poison when he was ill, which caused his death. Ultimately, I opted for making a settlement out of court.

My political life started during the famine when I was visited by Manikuntola Sen, a leading member of the Women's Self Defence League. Up to then, only a Congress women's organisation existed in Midnapur District. Manikuntola came to do relief work, and I took her around everywhere. In her book,* she refers to me as *Batashi*, the widow dressed in a white loincloth.

Together, we travelled around in the villages to open gruel kitchens for the

famine stricken. At home, my family was not willing to let me join the movement. Manikuntola tried to convince them. My older brother threatened to beat me up, yet Manikuntola secretly took me along with her. She gave me a silk sari to wear and advised me to change back to my widow's dress before returning home. She also took me into the women's committee in charge of running the work centres. I moved to another house in order to be able to do all this.

Subsequently, to fight famine conditions, I established a centre for producing mats and also several milk centres. How desperate women then were! One woman herself drank the milk intended for her baby, while holding the dead child in her arms. We enrolled members by soliciting goods for distribution to the destitute as membership fee.

As we did not have the strength to organise a demonstration yet, I went alone to visit the magistrate. I could talk with authority to him, since the membership of the Mahila Samiti, the local branch of the Women's Self Defence League, had meanwhile reached 1,000. In a dramatic gesture, I took off my jewellery, as I was pleading with the magistrate to provide food at the controlled rate. After this, he agreed to my proposal.

Another step we took was to prohibit beggars from begging in villages other than their own- Once a week, we distributed rice to them which, in handfuls, we had quietly gathered by moving from house to house. We also visited houses to take stock of the medicines needed, and we helped the ill to procure them.

For destitute women, we set up a system of *dekhi*** labour. From the godowns of big owners, these women obtained paddy which they processed and sold, after which they repaid the supplying

landlords. Because the Mahila Samiti gave them guarantees, the landlords were willing to provide paddy to the destitute.

Our *dekhi* programme had a double result. It enabled destitute women to feed their own families and, at the same time, these destitutes became Samiti members, paying a handful of rice as membership fee.

Moreover, the Mahila Samiti resolved any quarrels that occurred between husbands and their wives. We would call the couple as well as the village judges and, where possible, we would arrange a settlement. If this was impossible, we would provide work to the woman and tell her to get a divorce. Our decisions were respected, since men feared that otherwise they would have to face the Mahila Samiti again.

To every house where there was a marriage we used to go in groups and demand a contribution, arguing to the husband: "You have taken a girl from this village, so you should support the women's committee." The men would donate happily. We used these contributions, sometimes amounting to 50 *taka*, to support those women who, because of quarrels, could no longer stay with their husbands.

Finally, for the whole period when the movement was going on, we managed to stop wife beating. However, in this area of Midnapur, where I built the Women's Self Defence League, the Tebhaga campaign was not launched.

Because landlord terror farther south in Midnapur district was more severe, the Communist Party decided to start the Tebhaga movement from there. Later on, it also spread to some extent to areas where I had built the Women's Self Defence League. Here there was no League, although women had participated in the salt movement of the Congress.

In the area where I originally worked there was little landlessness and landholdings were relatively small. Nandigram, however, was a region of interior villages with little developed communication network. Here, landlessness was wide-spread, yet most

of those who joined the Tebhaga movement were sharecroppers. Extraction was outrageous—three fourths of the harvest went to the landlord including the charge for the means of production, while only one fourth could be retained by the cultivator. From this share, other dues, such as the repayment of loans, were further subtracted.

By this time, I had become a member of the Communist Party's district committee. There were two women on this committee, out of a total of 20 to 25 persons. Women generally were afraid of becoming party members.

I travelled to Nandigram together with the male party cadres, Bhopal Panda, Soroj Ray and Ananta Maji. My older brother vainly objected: "There are a lot of policemen there. Who will protect you?" In front of the court in Tamluk town, right at the square, it was announced that persons were being sent to start Tebhaga. Not surprisingly, the intelligence branch followed us when we went to the interior village of Ramchok.

In the evening, I had to give a speech at a meeting of about 60 women, all Hindus and heavily submerged in *parda*. They had folded their veils in such a manner as to cover the whole face. While I was talking, women nodded inside their veils, but nobody spoke in reaction to what I said. In the area from where I came, *parda* did exist, but was less strict. Women there just covered their head, without concealing their faces.

The next village where I attended a women's meeting was Kedemari, the village where the movement was born. Here, about 100 women had gathered, half of whom were Muslims. *Parda* was equally strong. Women even wore burkas. At the end of the meeting women offered *paranam*; they touched my feet to show respect. I said: "I am not that kind of person. I prefer another kind of respect, namely, that you talk to me!"

Within 10 or 12 days we held seven or eight women's meetings. The landlords threatened the peasant men that they would refuse to give any more land in

* *Sediner Katha* (Memoirs Of Those Days), Nabapatra Prakasan, Calcutta, 1982.

** The pedal for husking paddy, operated exclusively by women.

sharecropping, if the men allowed their wives to join our meetings.

The next step was the holding of a common meeting, covering all the villages visited so far. The place was a temple, since women were only allowed to attend if the meeting was held there. About 250 Hindu and Muslim women were present. I explained about the repression they would have to face in case a movement began. The landlords would take measures that might even include the killing of their husbands and the throwing of persons into jail. The women nevertheless agreed to launch the movement to end the landlords' oppression. Still, they continued to be in *parda*.

We proceeded by staging a demonstration in Kedemari village which stretches alongside the river, with dykes on three sides. About 300 women joined, quite a good number! We held streamers and shouted slogans : "*Hindu-Muslim Bhai Bhai Sab Krishoker Ek Larai*" (Hindus and Muslims are brothers, all peasants are united in one struggle); "We want Tebhaga on the basis of a receipt and without a receipt we will not deliver our paddy." We did not require a mike! On our way through the village, we also passed by the landlord's granary. By now, *parda* had decreased compared to earlier gatherings.

At this time, even before Tebhaga actually started, intimidation and repression increased. Doorkeepers were sent by landlords to the peasants' homes to issue threats : "If you don't stop, we will break your bones and send you to jail ; beware, communists will snatch your wives!" Local police stations started issuing warrants of arrest against peasant men, but not against any woman, except myself.

Police also employed spies. We did not realise this. Within two weeks from the day we had begun holding meetings, police camps were established in the villages. The night before we planned to cut the first paddy, a group of guardsmen, *lathials*, was plied with liquor at the landlord's granary. These ruffians were instructed to attack us mercilessly with big glass bottles.



We delayed our programme but things had been prepared in such a way that no peasant was willing to harvest paddy for his lord.

Meanwhile, the searching of houses had been started to find out other leaders and me. In order to escape, I dressed like a local woman, wearing clothes according to the custom prevailing in Nandigram. I also put on jewellery, for in this area even women from poor peasant families wore silver ornaments.

A similar thing happened at my next place of stay. Once again, I had to flee. We were holding a meeting at the village quarter where I had been dropped by boat. This place was encircled by the police and the situation became critical. One woman was so afraid that I would be arrested that she trembled all over. We devised a new tactic. One woman was to simulate that she was pregnant, with three or four women sitting around her. In the meantime, I got ready to flee, together with two old

women. Each of us carried a big bamboo bowl, in which the lower parts of paddy stalks in the field are collected.

When police personnel entered the quarter, other women kept them engaged, scolding : "You can't touch women !" In this melee, we managed to sneak out. At night, the police maintained its siege of the village and forced every woman to show her forehead, since I had a mark on my forehead by which I could easily be identified.

A few days later, after I had once again evaded the police net, we women initiated the cutting of paddy. We prepared about 150 small red flags which we planted around the plot that we were going to harvest. We had planned that each woman would bring her own instruments, such as a broom and a small sack containing a mixture of salt and pepper, with which we would repel a police attack. I was present when the work of harvesting started, but retreated when the police

arrived on the scene. After all, if I was arrested, the movement would collapse.

The police, however, fled when repelled by the women, leaving about 100 rifles behind. These we left abandoned in the field, for if we snatched the guns a court case would be instituted against us. Meanwhile, guardsmen collected our brooms and deposited them at the police station. We, therefore, sat around the police rifles and refused to depart unless the broomsticks were returned. About 300 *bighas* of land were harvested that day, by women alone. Boys had shifted to other villages which were to be covered next.

Next, we heard that many guardsmen had been collected at the granary to beat up women with glass. We circulated the news that we would besiege the granary and give the guardsmen a thrashing. About 3,000 men and 2,000 women armed with broomsticks, gathered. Since the granary was surrounded by a big pond on three sides it was easy to besiege it by blocking the main entrance road. This is what we did.

We chanted the slogan : "If you want to survive come out, leave the village and never return !" When the guardsmen, 30 in all, did come out, we smeared their faces with black paint. Each of them had to pass the row of 2,000 women and was beaten up with brooms. The three brothers, landlords, were forced to ask mercy from the women. Cloths were tied around their neck as an insulting punishment.

After this, all the paddy in the village came under the peasants' control and was collected at a joint threshing floor and no threshing was allowed until a settlement was reached.

Whenever the police raided a village, it was surrounded by women who would not permit them to arrest and take away the men. Women would gather after the sounding of the conchshell. The arms used in the confrontation with the police included a spear called *chowki*, which tears off the skin from human bodies, and the weapons of the goddess Kali, *khorgo* and *heshua*. There was no extreme talk

about arms, but tactics were devised to face the enemy.

The landlords did not wait passively, but called the peasants for a meeting at one granary. They said their purpose was to reach an agreement. About 500 peasants attended the session which lasted from 10 in the morning to 8 in the evening. Then, all 500 peasants were arrested and taken to the jail in Tamluk town. Once again, the police searched village after village to catch leading cadres. As for me, I was staying in a Muslim quarter. There was a price of 1,000 *taka* on my head.

Once all district leaders of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party had been arrested, all the responsibility of leadership fell on me. To evade arrest, I started living in a cemetery. We had received reports that this would be safest, since the police were most fearful of cemeteries.

Our next target was a village called Tatapura, a big village with Muslim landlords. When, in the evening, we were holding our meeting, the landlords set fire to one of their houses, so that they could file a criminal charge against me. As a result, four police camps were erected in this village and searchlights were installed which flashed throughout the night. Would there be any way to escape this time? It seemed we were trapped.

Then, we decided to hide in a field where paddy was floating in the water. To evade the searchlight, we bowed down our heads. One comrade kept my son, Biplob, on his back. After we waded through the water and indeed managed to get away, I was completely frozen. It took the others three hours to revive the sense in my body, by massaging me with a mixture of cummin seed and oil. In the village we had left behind, the police once again checked each woman's forehead.

We held a meeting to plan our next steps. A decision was taken to collect funds for the 500 detenus, by withholding from the landlords their newly determined paddy share, that is, one third of the crop. We also decided to destroy with hoes the landlords' threshing floors. The landlords'

paddy share we sold to small steamers passing by on the river.

Now, in each peasant home, there is a statue of the goddess of fortune, Lakkhi. She is seated on a throne in a wooden frame called *Lakkhir kulungi*, flanked by stalks of rice as symbols. The police were instructed to destroy these statues in every house. Simultaneously, police personnel also stole goats, chicken, fish and so on. They thought that if the niches of the goddess were destroyed, the people would blame me, Bimala, and hand me over to the police.

We, the district leadership, took the step of sending a deputation to Calcutta. The deputation travelled all the way on foot. I was disguised as a male Sikh. We first visited the party office and then were accompanied by party leaders like Jyoti Basu to the prime minister, Suhrawardy, who, at first, refused to meet us Renu Chakraborty and Manikuntola Sen, leaders of the Women's League, were also present. Finally, Suhrawardy promised he would send people to investigate our complaints. This he did indeed, but the "investigators" were not allowed to talk to us. Still, police camps were removed, one by one, from the village areas.

Meanwhile, Tebhaga had spread far and wide. At some places, the raiding policemen were drowned while crossing canals and their guns were snatched by the women. The landlords, on the one hand, wanted a settlement and were under pressure to have the detenus released without bail. On the other hand, they established their own paramilitia known as Seva Dal.

My arrest was finally facilitated when a doctor informed the police of the presence of an urban boy, who was in fact my son, Biplob, in a poor peasant family's home. When we were encircled in this village, I thought once again of escaping through a very thorny bush path nearby. But others advised against this and said it was impossible.

The landlord's guardsmen entered the village, beat up anybody they could catch,

and dragged people before the police subinspector. Four of us were sitting inside a mosquito net. The guardsman who first spotted me commented : “From inside the snake’s basket the snake is still wagging its tail.” Then, when they started hitting us, I opened my veil and said they should stop their beating. “Don’t tie the women with ropes for we will go to jail without that.”

After our arrest, the police and the guardsmen belonging to the landlords’ paramilitia went to eat goat at the landlord’s house. I did not permit them to feed the landlord’s milk to my child.

At the police station, a crowd of policemen, who had been vainly trying to catch me, came to stare at me. One police officer genuinely tried to help. He advised that I should contact party leaders inside jail for consultation. When I was brought to his house to take a bath, the women there were very sympathetic to me.

Later, 140 cases were instituted against me. In jail, I was kept inside a cage for one month. Some time after, the Communist Party called for a mass hunger strike inside jails. 300 participated in it in Midnapur jail. For 15 days we all had to suffer forced feeding. As punishment, we were given food without salt. Many people died as a consequence of the forced feeding. My stay in jail lasted for two and a half years.”



Bimala Maji’s narration climaxed in the story about her own arrest. Once she was caught, the Tebhaga movement in the Nandigram area of Midnapur did not advance. Clearly, a lot had depended upon her personal leadership.

The narration was long and exciting. Going over it in my mind afterwards, however, I realised that Bimala had only partly described the conditions of exploitation of women. So I asked her to expand on this. Bimala added the following comments after a pause :

“As far as exploitation and oppression goes, I can state this. Ordinary women, even in poor peasant families, only had any rights if they toiled very hard. If they refused, any injury could be inflicted on



them, including murder. Many middle class girls and women committed suicide, by hanging or poisoning themselves, when they could no longer bear the oppression.

In the area where I originally worked and set up women’s committees, the landlords did not have the guts to abuse village women. But in Nandigram, where Tebhaga was waged, the practice was very common. Women considered beautiful were ordered to go ‘for a talk’ or for work to the landlord’s granary. I remember several such instances. Widows too were abused, having to toil by day and being sexually exploited at night. The sexual exploitation was stopped during the Tebhaga campaign. After that time, the landlords no longer dared indulge in it.

The dowry custom did not exist in its present form. You could give some jewellery at marriage, but this was not

obligatory. It was customary for the father of the bridegroom to offer a lavish meal on the day of the wedding. In case he was unable to do this, he would pay some money instead, about Rs 150. Even amongst landlords, there was no system of huge payments in gold or silver.

The sexual division of labour was thus—on the whole, women, even amongst Hindus, could not labour in the field and could not even sell rice in the market. Women did some transplanting, but this part of paddy production was mainly performed by men. The cutting of the harvest crops was also considered a male task, except in special circumstances. Carrying the load from the field was a woman’s task, as was threshing of the paddy. Finally, the biggest oppression against women were the quarrels with their husbands, caused by the lack of food.”