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Role of women in Tebhaga movement

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ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS:

Tebhaga- three shares, Jotedars- share croppers, KisanSbha-peasant organizations, Naribahini- Women's militia

The Tebhaga movement was an important phenomenon in the pages of history, because the rural women gave the movement its momentum. In this movement woman from different communities fought together irrespective of caste to achieve the common aim. The landless poor peasant women formed fighting troops called naribahini and played a decisive role in defending the gains of the movement and in countering the repression of the state. The movement mobilized a large section of poor peasants to the forefront of the agitation. In this paper an attempt has been made to point out the role played by woman agitators and their organizations in the popularization of the movement.

Introduction

Tebhaga movement in Bengal in the mid-forties was a struggle of sharecroppers demanding two thirds of the produce from land for themselves and one third for the landlords. Tebhaga literally means 'three shares' of harvests. Traditionally, sharecroppers used to hold their tenancy on fifty-fifty basis of the share of the produce. In land control parlance such cropping system was known as barga, adhi, bhagi etc., meaning half share. The sharecroppers were commonly called bargadars, adhiars etc. The traditional system of dividing produce between the sharecroppers and owners came under challenge in 1946-47, when the sharecroppers called the traditional system unjust and claimed two-thirds share of the whole produce on the ground of their investment and labour input. It was the first consciously attempted revolt by a politicized peasantry in Indian history. Therefore, the movement assumes a special significance in the study of Indian peasant struggles.

Evolution of the movement

The movement was started by share cropping peasants in order to improve their position within the existing structure. With the memory of a devastating famine, the

jotedars demanded an immediate increase in the share of harvest. When they decided to put the demand into practice, the struggle for Tebhaga, a two-thirds share started. The aim of the movement was to alter the division of the crop to “Tebhaga”, three parts of which two parts would be kept by the sharecroppers and one part taken by the landlord. The movement was led and organized by Kisan Sabha, the peasant mass front of the Communist Party of India (Gupta, 1986) and in the process mobilization agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, poor peasants became the driving force against the jotedars, zamindars, money lenders, traders and the British bureaucracy. Young communists went out to the countryside to organize peasants to take the harvested crop to their own threshing floor and make the two-thirds a reality. The movement began in North Bengal and gradually spread throughout the rest of the province (Sarkar, 2008). The main slogan of the agitators was “Adhinai Tebhaga Chai” (we want 2/3rd not half) and it was accompanied by other slogans like “Langal Jar Jami Tar” (land to the tiller), “Nijkholanedhantolo” (stack paddy in your own courtyard), “Britisher Dalal Bharat charo” (agents of the British, Quit India), “Hindustan Zindabad”. The movement mobilized a large section of poor peasants to the forefront of the agitation. In this paper an attempt has been made to point out the role played by woman agitators and their organizations in the popularization of the movement.

The Tebhaga movement was an important phenomenon in the pages of history, because the rural women gave the movement its momentum. In this movement woman from different communities fought together irrespective of caste to achieve the common aim. There arose a major question that why rural women ultimately led the movement. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, the rural poor women were the most oppressed section in Bengal’s agrarian society. Above all they were socially oppressed by the males in their families also. Therefore, they showed double strength in their fighting. Secondly, sometimes these rural poor women employed as tenants and labourers were exploited by the landlords both economically and physically (Custers, 1986). Thirdly, the women came forward to look after their forlorn families, to feed their children and to take care of the cattle. Another important factor is that they wanted to challenge landlordism and male oppression.

It was at this time that women’s organizations were formed in different parts of undivided Bengal. They were All India Mahila Sammelan, Bangiya Pradesik a Mahila Atma Rakshak Samiti. In this movement women were organized under the banner of a Communist group in Calcutta- Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (Women’s Self-defence Society) (Santharam, 1996). MARS functioned from 1942 and admitted nearly 40,000 members. It extended its activities to the villages and rendered relief

programmes during the famine period. Rani Mitra Das Gupta, ManikuntalaSen, RenuChakravarthy were the active members of MARS and they wanted to educate, politicize and to bring rural women into this movement(Forbes, 2004). For that cultural programmes and literary campaigns were held. They set up cottage industries of spinning and weaving in order to overcome acute cloth crisis. By encouraging women to work and gain income, their position would improve. Committees were set up in the village; district and provincial levels and meetings were held in different parts and the organizers decided to tour the village to spread the ideology. By the time of Tebhaga movement, the women's organizations were active but their activities differed. In the initial stage they met strong opposition from family, caste groups and from other villages. MARS prepared them to resist the traditional female dependency and the domestic structure.

ManikuntalaSen and RenuChakravarthy studied deeply about the women's problems of economic exploitation and political oppression. First and foremost, meeting times had to be convenient for women. Second, if women were going to play a prominent role in the movement, something had to be done to free them from household work. Third, something had to be done about the women's complaints that their husbands beat them, drank too much, and took away the money they earned through petty trade. BimalaMaji, a young widow- girl was appointed as a recruitment officer of women and later emerged as an overall leader of the Tebhaga campaign in the Nandigram area of Midnapur. Women were recruited in large numbers to the volunteer squads, which harvested the paddy and stacked it on the sharecroppers threshing floors. For destitute women they set up a system of dhekilabour(rise husking pedal operated by foot). Because of the works of MahilaSamiti, big landlords agreed to provide paddy to the destitutes. The dheki programme enabled them to feed their families and also they became members of this women committee.

At first women played a subsidiary role, helping harvest the crops, cooking food for the leaders, acting as lookouts and sounding the alarm to alert their colleagues to danger. As police oppression became more brutal and the communist party unprepared for an armed struggle withdrew from active leadership, women formed their own militia, the "naribahini". The naribahini meant: spontaneous class leadership. Their duty was to guard the village at night. They were armed with "Daa"(used for cutting wood), Gayan(the pole for husking paddy) etc(Gupta, 1986). Women participated in meetings, demonstrations and delegation to landlords etc. But rarely were they elected or nominated committees set up to organize the movement in the villages.

Features of naribahini

- Eventhough the name of naribahini is varied from region to region- Jhata(broom) Bahini, Protirodh(resistance) Bahini, NariRakhi(defence) Bahini, Gayen(pestler) Bahinietc – they shared common features.
- Naribahini had clear cut social base. It differed from that of KisanSabha and of MARS. The cadres of MARS were mostly hailed from middle class or better-off peasant families(SinghaRoy, 1992). But the members of the naribahini were doubly oppressed women from scheduled caste Hindu tribal communities. In many of the areas of Bengal they cultivated the fields along with their husbands as agricultural labourers. A large number of tribal members of the naribahini in particular were agricultural labourers.
- A unique feature of this movement was the active participation of Muslim women.
- They were locally based and undertook primarily the tasks of defending villages and agricultural fields.
- Women were given guerilla training to fight.
- It is interesting to note that widows often became leaders.
- The naribahini was armed only with household instruments like jhata(broomsticks), boti(wooden panel with a knife attached to cut vegetables), or gayen (pestlers) which are used for processing paddy at home, rul(stick), churi(small knife) and bollom(spear).

Participation and Function

Women were responsible for the communication network, between the different units, conveying information when they went to the market or to visit relatives, messages for the district co-coordinating meetings rally etc. The rural poor women tried to defend villages and homes and succeeded in warding off police raids. They were responsible for the warning system that operated when the police or the landlord entered the village by sounding conch shells, bells and drums etc. It was a specific contribution of women. Conch shells were used mostly in Hindu inhabited areas while in Muslim dominated villages' school bell was used.

They also provided food and shelter for KisanSabha activities. The militancy is most remembered in incidents concerning attempted arrest of Kisan and communist leaders. They took the initiative of rescuing people from police custody by gheraoing police parties. For example the women dragged the police boat ashore and prevented

the police taking away arrested men, in Laljung three women were killed preventing the police escaping after raiding the local Kisan Sabha office. Ahalya who was in the advanced stage of pregnancy became a great martyr. Her womb was slashed open by a bayonet. This illustrates the determination and dedication of woman for achieving their goals.

During the Tebhaga movement in direct confrontation between peasants, police and landlords, women took leading roles. They led the volunteer forces to harvest paddy collectively. Under Bimala's lead the decision was taken to destroy the jotedars threshing floors with hoes and to sell the landlord's paddy-shares to small steamers. Once sharecroppers had achieved their initial demand, women raised their own demands concerning sexual oppression, inequality and wife-beating. Beating of wives was reported to local committees and as per the resolution men were fined and socially condemned. They learned not only to use arms but also to read and write. In this way through active participation, their political consciousness was raised (Gupta, 1986). The movement stressed Hindu Muslim and tribal peasant's unity. The joint participation helped to destroy food taboos. Hindu, Muslim and tribal leaders were fed by all sections of the peasantry. The Muslim women also utilized their purdah privileges to hide activists. As women began to know about their rights they began to demand fixed hours, payments for work and they raised questions regarding the ownership of money earned from selling vegetables, milk and fish. Even the most backward society's women were actively participating in the construction of the new society.

Conclusion

The Tebhaga movement is a good example for the political role played by women. Rural poor women gave precious leadership to the uprising. This movement highlighted the fact that women were able to perform both domestic and political roles. Women took leading roles against the landlord and police attacks and led volunteers force to harvest paddy. Due to lack of co-ordination and political guidance inevitably led to the disintegration of the revolutionary agrarian movement. But it was wrong to portray Tebhaga as a failure. At the end of the movement the peasantry scored concrete economic and social gains. Then on the jotedars neither claim illegal cesses nor rape village women at their will. The Tebhaga movement legally concedes the demand for two-thirds of the harvest crop. Politically it was a class struggle of sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, men and women against the landlords and jotedars. In this struggle, both Hindus and Muslims joined together. Thus it promoted communal harmony in areas where Tebhaga struggles raged.

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