

A Study on The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant peasant movements that occurred during the time of colonial Bengal was known as the Tebhaga Movement. In the years 1946–1947, it was initially introduced to the public under the leadership of the Communist Party of India and the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha. The primary requests that it made were that sharecroppers, also known as bargadars in the local community, be awarded two-thirds of the harvested crop rather than the customary half. The emergence of the movement was influenced by a number of factors, including severe rural poverty, exploitative landlordism, tenancy instability, debt, and the economic consequences from the Bengal famine that occurred in 1943. Tebhaga is a term that literally translates to "three shares." It refers to the requirement that the landlord receive one-third of the yield and the cultivator receive two-thirds of the produce. Notable districts in the northern and eastern parts of Bengal, such as Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Mymensingh, Khulna, and Jessore, were among those that experienced significant levels of influence from the movement. Women have made a big contribution by participating in demonstrations, defending harvested crops, fighting evictions, and organising communities in rural areas. Additionally, the movement demonstrated how communist and left-wing organisations were ascending to a position of increasing influence among peasants. Despite the fact that its immediate success was hindered by repression, arrests, sectarian tensions, political developments, and the Partition of Bengal, the campaign was successful in exerting a great deal of pressure on the colonial authority and in contributing to the subsequent tenancy modifications. Farmhands and sharecroppers in India gained a greater political awareness as a result of the Tebhaga Movement, which also shook up the system of rural exploitation. This was a pivotal period in India's agrarian conflicts. With the implementation of land reform legislation and the subsequent execution of Operation Barga in West Bengal, the legacy of the movement was secured to continue long after the country gained its independence.

Keywords: *Bengal, Sharecroppers, Peasant Movement, Bengal Kisan Sabha, Communist Party of India, Agrarian Struggle, Zamindari System.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important peasant movements in colonial India's history, the Tebhaga Movement (1946–1947) was a pivotal moment in the development of the Communist movement in Bengal. The initiative, which was led by the All India Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party of India, aimed to improve sharecroppers' financial circumstances by calling for a higher portion of agricultural products. It was a significant factor in the development of peasant politics in eastern India and represented a potent fight against the exploitative agrarian system that predominated during British colonial authority.

"Tebhaga" literally translates to "two-thirds share." In Bengal's old sharecropping system, called the Adhi or Bargadari system, sharecroppers (called bargadars) farmed land owned by landlords or jotedars and were typically obliged to give the landowner half of the gathered crop. The peasants said they should have received a bigger portion of the produce because they supplied the majority of the work, seeds, animals, and agricultural inputs. As a result, the movement called for landlords to receive only one-third of the crop and farmers to keep two-thirds (tebhaga).

The movement's beginnings might be linked to Bengal's declining agricultural circumstances in the 1940s. Widespread rural misery was brought on by high taxes, high rents, debt, landlord exploitation, and the terrible effects of the 1943 Bengal Famine. Furthermore, because sharecroppers paid the majority of the cultivation expenditures, the Flood Commission's recommendations (Bengal Land Revenue Commission, 1940) recommended that they receive two-thirds of the yield. These suggestions offered a compelling defence of the peasants' demands, even though the colonial authority did not follow them. The movement was organised and led in large part by the Communist Party of India. Communist leaders organised thousands of peasants in places like Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Mymensingh, Khulna, Midnapore, and 24 Parganas through the All India Kisan Sabha. Local party activists organised meetings and protests, established peasant committees, and urged sharecroppers to keep produced grain in their own granaries rather than giving it to the landlords. The movement placed a strong emphasis on opposition to feudal exploitation, social unity, and group action.

In the Tebhaga Movement, women were also crucial. They organised protests at the village level, actively took part in rallies, defended harvested crops, and opposed police raids. Their participation showed how rural women are becoming more involved in political and agrarian struggles, which makes the movement both politically and socially relevant. The landlord class and the British colonial authority retaliated with harsh repression. Numerous peasants and communist activists were arrested, police were sent in to put an end to protests, and there were violent altercations in a number of regions. The movement quickly gained traction and garnered broad support from low-income peasants and agricultural labourers in spite of this crackdown. The movement had a long-lasting effect on agricultural politics even though it progressively subsided after independence and the 1947 Partition of Bengal.

The historical significance of the Tebhaga Movement was extensive. By increasing its popularity among rural communities and showcasing its dedication to the welfare of peasants, it increased the Communist Party of India's power in Bengal. The movement brought agricultural issues to the

forefront of political discourse and exposed the exploitative aspects of the sharecropping and zamindari regimes. It also influenced laws pertaining to sharecroppers' rights in West Bengal and served as an inspiration for subsequent land reform movements. Many of the demands made during the Tebhaga Movement were mirrored in tenancy changes after independence and, in subsequent decades, in initiatives like Operation Barga that aimed to defend sharecroppers' rights.

By connecting the fight for economic justice with the larger campaign for social equality and political freedom, the movement also aided in the development of democratic mass politics in India. It inspired comparable agrarian battles in other regions of the nation, such as the Telangana Movement, and showed how organised peasant groups could confront long-standing rural exploitation regimes.

Bengali peasants' developing political consciousness and the Communist Party of India's growing power were mirrored in the historic Tebhaga Movement, an agrarian struggle in colonial India. In addition to raising awareness of peasants' rights, the movement established the groundwork for post-independence land reforms and the growth of left-wing politics in eastern India by seeking a fair share of agricultural produce and opposing feudal exploitation. It continues to be one of the most significant peasant movements in contemporary Indian history and a pivotal moment in the development of the Indian communist movement.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

As a result of multiple phases of colonial land policies, Bengal's agricultural structure evolved throughout British rule. The landlords who collected taxes were given more authority and influence in Bengal when the Permanent Settlement of 1793 instituted a robust zamindari system. Several tiers of middlemen have developed between the state and the real farmers throughout the years. Rural Bengal had a complicated social structure by the 1900s, with zamindars, jotedars, occupancy tenants, non-occupancy tenants, sharecroppers, and agricultural labourers all playing unique roles. It was one of the most precarious jobs in the building for the bargadars. It was an exchange for a portion of the harvest that they farmed other people's land. The 1930s and 1940s were a particularly hard time for peasants economically. Weakening purchasing power, increasing prices, population pressure, and rural indebtedness all contributed to widespread misery. The 1943 Bengal famine wreaked even more havoc on rural communities. Numerous small-scale farmers were pushed off their land or grew more reliant on landlords and moneylenders, while millions endured famine, sickness, and the threat of displacement. These conditions created an environment in which organized agrarian protest could develop.

MEANING AND ORIGIN OF TEBHAGA

Tebhaga is a Hindu term that literally translates to "three shares." The most important demand of the movement was that the crop should be effectively divided into three parts, with two-thirds going to the sharecropper and one-third going to the landlord. The premise that the cultivator supplied the majority of the labour that was required for agricultural production was the basis for the demand. As a result, sharecroppers believed that the previous fifty-fifty agreement was unfair, particularly in

situations where they also provided agricultural inputs. As a result of the Bengal government's acceptance of recommendations about tenancy and sharecropping circumstances, the campaign gained substantial momentum. After examining Bengal's agricultural system and making recommendations for significant improvements, particularly those concerning sharecroppers, the Floud Commission, which had been constituted in 1938 and had reported its findings in 1940, had assessed the system. The following Tebhaga campaign relied heavily on these ideas as a significant intellectual and political foundation.

ROLE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA

The Tebhaga Movement was mostly organised by the Communist Party of India, which played a significant role in the movement. Sharecroppers and agricultural labourers were brought together by Communist militants thru the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha by means of the organization. The organisers placed a greater emphasis on communal action as opposed to individual protests that were isolated. Peasants were urged to form local committees, slogans and demands were disseminated, and meetings were held in the villages all over the country. As a result, the movement was not merely an unplanned revolt in rural areas; rather, it was also an organised effort to reform agrarian relations thru the use of collective political action.

MAJOR AREAS OF THE MOVEMENT

Numerous districts in Bengal were affected by the Tebhaga Movement's spread. The city of Dinajpur was the location where it exerted the greatest influence, but other regions, including Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Mymensingh, Khulna, Jessore, and portions of the 24 Parganas, also had substantial activity. Depending on the local agrarian conditions, political organization, and the interaction between bargadars and jotedars, the strength of the movement varied from region to region according to the circumstances.

MAJOR DEMANDS OF THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

The main protagonists of the Tebhaga Movement (1946–47) were the bargadars, or sharecroppers, of Bengal who fought against the classist agricultural system. The most fundamental requirement was that the jotedar or landlord should only get one-third of the overall produce, while the sharecroppers should receive two-thirds. The demand for a three-part distribution of the output was symbolised by the phrase "Tebhaga," which means "three shares" in English. The cultivator would receive two parts of the produce. Because they did the most of the work in the fields, the sharecroppers claimed they should have a bigger cut of the harvest. Instead of having the harvested crops transported to the landlord's storage facilities, another key requirement was that they be kept on the property of the sharecroppers. Landlords and jotedars had a lot of say over the harvested crops and could take advantage of a lot of deductions under the old system. The bargadars wanted to stop unjust deductions, bank account manipulation, and illegal crop seizure, thus they demanded control over crop storage.

Safety from eviction and assurance of continued tenancy were other demands of the movement. Landlords might remove sharecroppers from their properties for a variety of reasons, and sharecroppers often had precarious rights to the land they farmed. As a result, the bargadars wanted their farming rights acknowledged and safeguards against forced displacement. It was believed that

secure tenancy was crucial to the farmers' economic and social standing and to increasing agricultural output. Additionally, the Tebhaga Movement fought against rural exploitation in all its manifestations, including unlawful exactions and arbitrary levies. Additional demands from landlords, jotedars, moneylenders, and other middlemen were common for impoverished farmers. More equitable treatment of landowners and growers was one goal of the movement, which aimed to put an end to such practices. Its secondary objective was to alleviate the economic exploitation and rural debt that had grown worse in the wake of the 1943 Bengal famine and the subsequent economic crisis.

The emancipation and respect of low-class farmers and agricultural labourers was another major demand. The campaign embodied a broader fight against Bengal's unfair agrarian structure and extended beyond the issue of crop distribution. The peasants wanted more say in agricultural output and more economic and social equality in rural society, so they banded together to form a collective. Last but not least, the Tebhaga Movement called for more extensive agricultural reforms to raise farmers' status. As a result, peasants were inspired to get politically active and aware of their rights, and landowners and jotedars were pushed out of power. While the campaign did not immediately succeed in achieving all of its goals, it was crucial in drawing government attention to the plight of sharecroppers and sparked discussions on land reform, tenant protection, and farmers' rights in West Bengal.

TEBHAGA MOVEMENT AND PARTITION OF BENGAL

There was a lot of political uncertainty at the time the movement was happening. Both the geographical and organisational continuity of the movement were greatly impacted by the communal tensions of 1946–47 and the ultimate Partition of Bengal. A lot of the places where the movement was active were split apart when Bengal was divided in 1947. The newly independent administrations' political interests shifted as well. Issues brought up by Tebhaga continued to be significant in both Bengal regions notwithstanding these changes. Among the most significant peasant movements in Bengal during the last phase of British colonial administration (1946–47) was the Tebhaga Movement. It sprang out of the needs of the bargadars, or sharecroppers, who farmed land owned by landlords and jotedars. The prevalent sharecropping system stipulated that farmers had to give up a significant amount of their harvest to the landowners. The movement's central demand was that landowners get just one-third of the crop and sharecroppers get two-thirds (tebhaga). The Communist Party of India and the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha were major organisers and influences of the movement.

During the height of Bengal's economic and political unrest, the Tebhaga uprising began. Rural discontent was exacerbated by the 1943 Bengal famine, inflation during the war, food shortages, rural indebtedness, and peasant exploitation. A bigger portion of the crop for the farmer was one of the sharecropping system reforms proposed by the Floud Commission (Bengal Land Revenue Commission). A favourable setting for organised peasant resistance emerged as a result of these factors. Bengali districts like as Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Mymensingh, Khulna, Jessore, and 24-Parganas were also touched by the uprising. The peasants started avoiding landlords by storing

their gathered harvests in their homes or granaries. Women took an active role by defending crops, planning protests, and fighting back against the interference of the police and landlords. Assoc. leaders and activists rallied rural populations under the banner of "Tebhaga," a phrase that highlighted the economic rights and respect of sharecroppers.

The Tebhaga Movement was greatly impacted by the 1947 Partition of Bengal. Partition separated Bengal into Pakistan's East Bengal and India's West Bengal, despite the fact that the movement had originated as an essentially regional agricultural conflict. While some of the regions where the uprising had taken root stayed in West Bengal, others became part of East Bengal. New political, administrative, and communal conditions were ushered in as a result of the split, which also severed the peasant movement's organisational networks. This caused the movement to slow down a bit.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

When thinking about the history of peasant movements in Bengal and modern India, it is impossible to ignore the 1946–1947 Tebhaga Movement. Sharecroppers, or bargadars, fought hard against the oppressive agricultural system. Proponents of the campaign argued that landlords should keep one-third of the produce and growers should keep two-thirds. Peasants gained strong political and social awareness as a result of the movement, and the issues faced by sharecroppers were discussed in public forums, even though the movement did not immediately accomplish all of its goals. The movement's influence on the economy was high among its significance. In an effort to give farmers a bigger cut of the crops they grew, the demand for Tebhaga posed a threat to the conventional wisdom about how harvests were divided up. The campaign brought attention to the financial struggles endured by low-income peasants, namely the weight of rent, debt, unlawful expropriations, and unstable housing. As a result, it came to symbolise the need for economic equality in rural Bengal.

The movement's impact on peasant organization and political awareness was substantial. In order to organise sharecroppers and develop the campaign throughout multiple districts, communist activists and the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha were instrumental. Collective action was taken by peasants who had been exploited before. The self-assurance they gained from being part of this collective group bolstered their resolve to fight for equal rights. The involvement of women was another significant aspect. In the face of efforts to grab gathered goods, rural women took an active role in protests, meetings, crop protection, and resistance. The fact that they were involved proved that the Tebhaga dispute encompassed entire rural communities and wasn't just a feud between male cultivators and landowners. Alterations to long-established forms of social and political mobilisation were also facilitated by women's involvement.

The Tebhaga Movement was politically significant because it gave communist and left-wing groups in rural Bengal more clout. The movement linked agricultural discontent with larger concerns about social inequality, land ownership, and class. It was a watershed moment in the communist movement's rise to power in rural Bengal and a demonstration of how organised political groupings can rally impoverished peasants around concrete economic demands. Agrarian reform consciousness emerged as a result of the movement as well. It highlighted the precarious situation of sharecroppers and the necessity for tenancy reform and legal protections for them. After independence, debates on

land distribution and tenancy rights remained rooted in the concerns voiced during Tebhaga. Historical considerations show that worries voiced during the Tebhaga fight were echoed in subsequent land reforms and sharecropper protections in West Bengal.

Within the framework of the Indian independence movement, the movement also held great significance. Despite its narrow emphasis on agrarian rights, it posed serious challenges to key institutions in colonial rural society. It proved that the fight for independence was about more than simply getting away from British authority politically; it was also about getting things fairer economically and socially. Consequently, the movement expanded rural people's understanding of what it means to be politically active. Lastly, the social and historical legacies of the Tebhaga Movement will endure for a long time. In the fight against exploitation and unfair agricultural relations, it came to represent the impoverished farmers' fight. Its impact is evident in the land reform efforts and later peasant struggles in Bengal. The campaign succeeded in raising awareness of the rights of sharecroppers, despite facing repression and being impacted by the political upheavals surrounding the Partition of Bengal in 1947. As a result, the Tebhaga Movement is still a significant part of Bengali history when it comes to peasant resistance, communist politics, agricultural reform, and social justice.

LEGACY OF THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

Even after 1947, Tebhaga's impact was felt. Tenancy protection demands were bolstered and land reform debates that followed were impacted by it. Successive administrations in West Bengal took steps to strengthen the legal and economic standing of sharecroppers and to safeguard them from harm. Operation Barga, which aimed to document and safeguard the rights of sharecroppers, was the most significant subsequent development. It was initiated in West Bengal in the late 1970s. Many people talk of Operation Barga in the context of the larger history of agrarian movements, which includes Tebhaga, even though the two campaigns were conducted decades apart and under extremely different political conditions.

CONCLUSION

A significant agrarian movement in Bengali history was the Tebhaga Movement, which took place in the 18th century. In 1946, it sprang from the profound economic and social challenges that sharecroppers were experiencing. It opposed the unfair distribution of agricultural produce and asked that farmers be afforded better security and dignity with regard to their work. It was the organisational efforts of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party of India that helped to boost the campaign. Additionally, the movement was able to get significant participation from women and peasants. Despite the fact that the Tebhaga system was not immediately implemented across the entirety of Bengal, the campaign was successful in transforming the political debate around tenancy and agrarian rights. Through this, the structural disparities that exist within the rural economy were brought to light, and the strength of collective peasant mobilisation was proved. Within the post-independence era, it continued to exert its influence through the implementation of land reform measures and the promotion of groups aimed at protecting sharecroppers. As a result, the Tebhaga Movement ought to be seen not only as a demand for a larger share of crops, but rather as a



more comprehensive campaign for economic fairness, tenancy rights, social dignity, and more control over agricultural production. For those interested in gaining an understanding of the history of peasant movements, communist politics, and agrarian transformation in Bengal, this topic continues to be a vital subject.

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