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Development Compilation
Vol. 17. Number 01. May 2022**EMPOWERMENT OF THE MARGINALS IN THE RURAL SECTOR OF
BURDWAN DISTRICT (AGRADWIP) 1947–1949****Dr. Kakali Mukherjee***

Abstract: Traditional peasant society came across a new world of democracy after the independence without knowing its significance in their life. During the colonial period, indigenous people across the social classes fought unitedly to win freedom. To accelerate freedom struggle peasantry along with the workers acceded to an alliance with the land lords and industrialists. After independence peasantry got the assurance of a socialist constitution with a compromised ideology of *Sarvodaya*. Instead of providing new society Congress Government protected the interest of the elite, of the old order. For the political power Congress Government and Congress party depended on the landed gentry and emerging business classes. Lack of social revolution created various kind of social and economic hierarchy in a new nation. At the same time, right of universal franchise provided the marginal, the opportunity of challenging local power and leadership. This paper would be analysing struggle of the peasants, marginal milkmen and landless labourers of Burdwan District of West Bengal in this political frame of India. It would be investigated in this paper that how the indigent, exploited villagers raised their voice in resistance against the rural gentry under the leadership of local C.P.I. leaders and workers. The paper would try to explain the role of the Lefts in mobilising these people from the below including the women of this region.

Keywords: Exploited, Social hierarchy, *Zamindar*, Marginal, Movement, Resistance, Women

Introduction

During the colonial period, indigenous people across the social classes fought together to win freedom. To accelerate freedom struggle peasantry along with the workers acceded to an alliance with the land lords and industrialists. The hope and expectation of golden future for the common people of India, after independence, came to be shattered within few years. Traditional peasant society of India came across a new world of democracy after the independence without knowing its significance in their

life. After independence peasantry got the assurance of a socialist constitution with a compromised ideology of *Sarvodaya*,¹ which promised an equality within a hierarchical social order. Instead of providing new society, Congress Government protected the interest of the elite, of the old order. Rural elites formed the support base of Congress since the colonial period. Like the other third world countries, India adopted the political system derived from the old imperialist master.² For the political power Congress Government and Congress party depended on the landed gentry and emerging business classes. Lack of social revolution created various kind of social and economic hierarchy in a new nation. At the same time, right of universal franchise provided the marginal, the opportunity of challenging local power and leadership. In many villages of West Bengal clash between the interest of rural elite and poor peasants culminated into radical struggle with the challenge of establishing an alternative political hegemony under the leadership of the communists. Rural unrest became visible in the districts of Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum, Medinipur and Hooghly through series of fierce movements, from 1948 under the umbrella of C.P.I. 131 militant rural conflict took place in West Bengal from 1947 to 1949.³ An empirical search would be explaining how a group of rural proletariats differing in their socio-economic background forged a united movement against their common class enemy. This article would be analysing struggle of the peasants, marginal milkmen and landless labourers of Burdwan district of West Bengal in this political frame of India. It would be explored in this article that how the indigent, exploited villagers raised their voice in resistance, against the rural gentry under the leadership of local C.P.I. (Communist Party of India) leaders and workers. The article would try to explain the role of the Lefts in mobilising these marginal people from the below including the women of this region.

Oppressed Inhabitants of Agradwip

Independence did not bring in socialism in a new nation. It was the rural gentry in countryside who were dominating the society, economy and politics of the local area. Matching the situation, the local *zamindar* of Agradwip under Katwa subdivision of Burdwan district of West Bengal ruled the area wilfully. Life of the common villagers became miserable due to the absolute dominance and hegemony of the *zamindary* of Mallik family. Approximately 1500 poor families of Agradwip, Babladanga, Kashipur, Jhaudanga area inhabited in this region.⁴ In ratio milkmen were in majority than the cultivators. By following a crude policy of division

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between the two communities *zamindars* maintained their dominance over this area. Uncultivated lands were distributed among the poor *korfa* (under raiyat) peasants by the *zamindar* in condition of submitting rupees 100/200 for a year.⁵ This system was known as '*Uthbandi*'.⁶ With intense labour and diligence peasants grew crops in these fields. At the time of harvesting the same lands were distributed again among the cowherds of that area as pasture by the *zamindar*. Cows of these milkmen were set free in these lands. In traditional peasant society, not only the landed gentry but anybody who does not belong to the clan of the peasantry is not reliable to the peasants.⁷ On this backdrop the role of the milkmen in this area was considered hostile to the interest of the peasantry. Action of the milkmen appeared to the peasants as a conspiracy against their existence to coerce them. This conflict between the two communities helped the *zamindar* to get hold of control over these helpless people. If individual protested against this act, land was given to more well-off peasant in the coming year. Out of fear no one even showed any kind of resistance. Under tremendous pressure they had to work in the fields of the landlord even without any remuneration. Stirred by this situation, contemporary writer Sauri Ghatak wrote a novel, '*Comrade*'. In this novel one of the protagonists, Sundari, narrates how the *peyadas* (private armed foot men of the local land lord) compelled the poor peasants to cultivate in the lands of *zamindar* without wage. Added to this, landlord collected fines forcibly from them. This literature described that from the beginning of dawn unfortunate cultivators took refuge in the nearby forest to get rid of this corvee service.⁸ It could be argued that peasants are always aware of their subaltern position and oppression in the hands of the non – peasant autocrats.⁹ The helpless cultivators were very much aware of their exploitation which was noticed by their desperate endeavour of escaping the corvee service by hiding themselves in the nearby desolate area. In reality whenever anybody tried to protest against this illegal action of the *zamindar*, were brutally beaten in the *kutchery* (court of the land lord) room. The unconscious body was thrown away from the area of *zamindari*. Even the women of the villages were not spared from the torture of the rural gentry. Neither the peasants got the success in having crops in their house nor they had enough food to feed for the year. The socio-economic hierarchy of the village successfully shattered their self-respect to the extent that even by hearing the name of *zamindar babu*, made them scared. It could be argued that peasants of Agradwip suffered the same as the peasant societies of the larger world

who were bounded by the double chains of lordship and labour all through.¹⁰

The Struggle

On this backdrop a veteran freedom fighter and convict of Chittagong armoury despoilment case, Subodh Chaudhuri came to Katwa in 1946, after release from the cellular jail. He conferred his faith on communism through Communist Consolidation in jail. After the release he came to his home at Agradwip with the intention of organising workers movement in Asansol. During his staying in Agradwip he became aware of the tormented life of the oppressed marginal rural people. By watching this kind of exploitation, he decided to mobilise these indigent people politically to achieve their right of living with respect. After independence Communist Party was about to organise a 'People's Democratic Revolution' all over India with peasants and workers on the forefront. Following the party line Subodh Chaudhuri took the initiative to mobilise these exploited rural marginals against the landlord. It was very difficult task to organise these above said isolated rural proletariat in protest of unjust social hierarchy and agony. With the help of district and sub divisional C.P.I. members, Subodh Chaudhuri started mobilising the peasants through secret meetings and discussions during the time of evening. Though the marginal peasants of Agradwip were aware of their exploitation but it was not easy for them to resist in solidarity against the rural elite. The economic power and social hegemony of the *zamindars* played a major role in subjugating this peasantry. Nature of peasant economy is also their weakness. It was very difficult for these *korfa* peasants to organise any united movement against the unjust action of the *zamindar* because of their agricultural work. In wider aspect village intellectuals, primary school teachers played an important role in mobilising uneducated peasants for ensuing battle.¹¹ In Agradwip, that responsibility was shouldered by communist leader Subodh Chaudhuri. The novel '*Comrade*' describes how the calm, languid peasantry became united and undaunted through regular organisational work of the communists.¹² Gradually cultivators became organised against the corvee service, system of illegal fine collection and united in support of impound system. For the first time in the leadership of Subodh Chaudhuri, villagers protested against the *zamindar* Patal Mallick known as *Choto Babu* (Younger landlord) by confiscating some of the cows of the milkmen.¹³ The insolent *zamindar* disregarded the protesting crowd by saying that the cows will keep on feeding the crop from his own land.¹⁴ For the first time under the

leadership of Subodh Chaudhuri united peasantry raised their voice in protest and declared 'no, cows will not'. They got that courage and determination for the first time due to continuous politicisation by the communist workers in this area. Under the leadership of Subodh Chaudhuri, a crop protection committee was formed, consisting of 16 members including Mahadev De, Mahadev Biswas, Hareram Biswas, Patol Biswas, Gopinath Biswas, Dumur Nandi, Loharam Shil, Kali Pal, Shona Pal, Rati Pal, Shona Mondal, Ananda De, Sanatan Rajoyar and others to fight this injustice.¹⁵ With the initiative and assistance of the *Krishak Sabha*, peasants deposited the cows to pinfold. Regular and relentless propaganda, meetings and movements aroused the consciousness of these repressed people in a way which ultimately made them confident in resistance against injustice. By surpassing their age-old fright, they became organised. It could be argued from wider historical perspective that in this kind of villages where illiteracy was a common phenomenon, oral communications such as meetings and slogans played a significant role in shaping the consciousness of the people.¹⁶ Under the leadership of Subodh Chaudhuri local communist leaders and workers organised various close door meetings to mobilise the villagers. By surpassing their various strife, conspiracy and habit of intoxication how villagers from different social strata became united in their newly acquired faith, was been described in above said novel of 'Comrade'. The most significant aspect of this novel is been depicted through an incident, where land less labourer and herder Kalipada, as the representative of the most marginal and poorest of the poor became one of the members of the committee. Despite of his landlessness, Kalipada became the comrade of the peasants in their battle of saving crop. As a hard-working labourer he tried to discern the position of the peasants with himself and supported them wholeheartedly. The desire to have an exclusive possession over land is not unusual in rural society, which might have mobilised people like Kalipada in this movement. Being member of the committee as the poor, exploited villagers both peasants and land less labourers became conscious of their class interest and unity through organised movement. Slogan of "abolition of the land lord system" and "land to tiller" raised by the Communist Party created a stir among the poor village folk. In hope of new dawn all marginal men stood in solidarity. From the very root of their existence these indigent people were been shaken by the movement of Agradwip. Through protest and preclusion for the first time, poor villagers succeeded in identifying their exploiter properly. It helped them to

recognise the real oppressor in the rural sector and made them susceptible to understand the stranded situation of the milkmen. This perception inspired them to be united in their struggle against the powerful enemy. With this spirit the protagonist Kalipada firmly stated to his wife Sundari, alone he would not be able to do anything but all the poor villagers would be fighting the battle unitedly. He posited that there will be no body to stop the united power of the villagers.¹⁷ He also argued that all the deprived people should be united in struggle to achieve the desired success. C.P.I. led *Krishak Sabha* successfully became the mouthpiece of hope and aspiration of the subjugated peasants. In this way C.P.I. organised the cultivators and became their own party by getting the support of the marginal people of the country side.

To resolve the rift between the peasants and the milkmen, an initiative was taken by the *Krishak Sabha*. Unity of the underprivileged people was an essential precondition in the battle against the most powerful. There was a scarcity of pasture during this time. With the initiative of *Krishak Sabha*, 'Go Char' (pasturage) movement was started under the leadership of Sushil Chakraborty.¹⁸ Under the initiative of *Krishak Sabha* the peasants of Gopinath para came in acquaintance with the milkmen of Ghosh para. In resistance against the immediate ruler and exploiter of village society, all marginal became united by identifying their comrades to obtain their right. It could be argued that in this way *Krishak Sabha* was making an endeavour to politicise these indigent rural masses through the class identity. Near about 400 men including the peasants and the milkmen submitted a memorandum at Katwa High court against the local *zamindar* along with the demands of the protection of crop and proper pasturage.¹⁹ It initiated the institutional base of organised integrated struggle of the exploited marginal men of the rural society under the leadership of *Krishak Sabha* and C.P.I. in this region for the first time.

In the fight against the colonialism and imperialism, unity was enforced across social classes and various political parties. In all the popular movements against the colonial rule, peasants along with the other rural marginal acceded to an alliance with the landlords. With the birth of a new state their hope for socialistic policy concluded in despair. The actual power remained in the hands of old elite classes as before.²⁰ From their class position, perspective of these elites remained same. Understanding between the rural gentry and the police remained the same. India, like most of the newly emerged independent states of third world adopted the political system derived from their imperial masters.²¹ This picture of

socio-economic inequality jolted the consciousness of these underprivileged and exploited people. They became aware of their class position in this hierarchical society through unremitting mobilisation of C.P.I. After identifying their enemy in class society, many leaders of the crop protection committee gradually became the member of *Krishak Sabha* and C.P.I.²² Ruthless suffering inflicted on the families of indigent peasants. Bastions of *Krishak Sabha* were attacked in offence of submitting memorandum in court. Most of the men folk of poor families left their homes in fear of torture. Women were not spared though. They were repressed in the name of searching. Situation became complex with the ban on C.P.I. In many third world countries the communists were outlawed after independence in the plea of maintaining law and order.²³ In absence of leadership, determination of the marginal people collapsed. In 1948 a young organiser of *Krishak Sabha* of Memari, Sunil Roy was sent to Agradwip to bring back the courage among the peasants with a fake name Rabi Roy.

Upsurge of the marginal

With the endeavour of bringing back the resilience of the oppressed people a Peasant Conference was organised in Agradwip. Undergrounded leaders like Subodh Chaudhuri, Shantabrato Chattopadhyay, Shashanka Chattopadhyay and peasants and milkmen in the leadership of Sunil Roy initiated whisper campaigning among the villagers to make the conference successful.²⁴ It could be argued that success of this conference manifested the collective will of the rural marginals through C.P.I. led *Krishak Sabha*. Scared by the repressed wrath of these marginal men police camp was deployed in front of the house of *zamindar*. The conference was to take place just before the Autumn festival of West Bengal in 1949. This fear among the rural elites, manifested a fissure on the porch of power. The rise of these repressed mass after so many decades endangered the very existence of this wealthy elites. Class unity among the poor became formidable in response to the ominous alliance between the exploiter and ruler of an independent state. On 28th September near about 1P.M., over thousands of people joined the conference surpassing all kind of fright and apprehensions of police attack at Gopinathpur.²⁵ While Peasants and workers of the *Krishak Sabha* were approaching towards stage in the meeting, the *lethels* (private hired soldiers of the rural gentry) of the *zamindars* tried to block their road. Peasants resisted them. Peasants and milkmen jointly broke into scuffle with the police. Surpassing the fear of

death these repressed people remained firm in resistance when police charged fire on air to disperse them. Ultimately with the death of 16/17 years old young Sunil Pal by the injury of bayonet turned the peasantry furious. Body of Sunil Pal was buried by the consolidated rural marginals under the leadership of Subodh Chaudhuri. He is considered as the first martyr of the peasant movement of Katwa district of Burdwan.

Empowerment of the repressed

Peasants became militant after this incident. Tremendous repression and comb searching began in the villages. Leader of the pasturage movement Sushil Chakraborty and worker of *Krishak Sabha*, Mani Pal were arrested. The active workers of *Krishak Sabha* and other male members could not enter the villages for nearly one and half years. Police forfeited the lands of the rebel peasants and tried to sell out the cows of the contending milkmen in auction. But this movement gathered the support from the mass. Police failed to get any buyer for these cows. The Communist Party successfully mobilised masses in support of this movement which was akin to building a popular collective will.²⁶ Protest and resistance of these repressed marginals against the age-old exploitation created a social upheaval in this village. In the absence of men folk and workers of *Krishak Sabha*, the women protected the organisation in the midst of extreme suppression by the police. They shouldered all the responsibilities including protection of crops in the field and supplying food to the hiding men. They not only became the comrades of their men; their self-confidence and self-respect was shaped through this movement. Women being the most backward, exploited community of rural society raised their voice for the first time. The novel 'Comrade' depicts how the women protagonist Sundari raised her voice against her assault in the hand of her husband Kalipada and demanded respect for being a comrade of him. With the initiative of other members of Communist Party, Kalipada admitted and realised his guilty and acknowledged Sundari as his comrade. In reality through the movement the women of Agradwip acquired the identity of their own and became the comrades of their men folk. It could be argued following Hobsbawm that when women come out of their inner domain on the streets it propelled them towards politics.²⁷ Empowerment of the women added a new dimension to class struggle. Strong base of the Communist Party was established through the secret propaganda by undergrounded leaders Subodh Chaudhuri, Sunil Roy, Shantabrato Chattopadhyay, Shashanka Chattopadhyay, Ananga Rudra and others in the areas of Kurchi, Tikarkhaji, Sribati, Depara, Singi, Karui

with the assistance of these combative women. The seed was sown to establish the struggle of justified right of all the marginal including small tillers, landless labourers, milkmen and women through this movement. Depending on their own confidence these poor, forlorn people started believing in an alternative hegemony of left politics beyond the existing frame of Congress politics.

Conclusion

Apparently, this movement was a failure. In reality the way the most backward, oppressed people of the rural society became united and launched an organised protest against the longstanding social hierarchy, created a history of the history less anonymous folk. This was a victory of these exploited villagers who for the first time in their life raised the voice of resistance against the most powerful in the society. In wider aspect after independence, marginal men of many Third World Countries had to compromise with their desired hope. The class formation of colonial era remained the same. With the continuous assistance of the Communist Party and its organisational power, repressed masses came to realise their class position in a class society. Politicisation of their consciousness propelled them to acquire their justified right. The early leadership and organisational planning were developed by the educated organic²⁸ leadership. Gradually local leadership emerged from among the peasantry. Along with the immediate problem of Agradwip, broader demands of *Krishak Sabha* like abolition of zamindari system, land to tillers, generated a huge appeal to the villagers. It helped them to understand that how their immediate crisis is intertwined with the basic crisis of rural economic structure. Through the movement small tillers, under raiyats, milkmen and the most oppressed class in rural society, women became aware of their existence as self- confident, politicised folk. In their struggle of existence by identifying the enemy and ally in the hierarchical society, these people attracted towards an alternative left politics of hegemony to achieve their desired right in a new country. Voice of these exploited, forlorn people of Agradwip and their organised movement offers a new perspective of our history from the below.

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