



# Sudhir Bhattacharya on Tebhaga Movement in Bengal

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If the historiography of Communism in India is in itself an underdeveloped sub-discipline, then the phase of Naxalite politics and thought within the history of Communism has received even lesser attention. There are many descriptions of the Naxalbari movement but not much on the intricate intellectuality of many of its partisans. In this article we provide some material for political theorists, sociologists, intellectual historians to analyse this Naxalite intellectuality. A schoolmaster called Sudhir Bhattacharya (1915-1990) lived in Calcutta and wrote on historical and political issues from his own Naxalite partisan location. His evaluation of a preceding episode of peasant insurgency in twentieth century India demands patient reading.

In his book *Tebhaga Sangram*, developed and published first in 1983 – based on unpublished notes from the 1960s – Suprakash Ray (pseudonym of Sudhir Bhaattacharya) narrated the peasant movement in Bengal of the 1930s and 1940s. The sharecroppers demanded two-third of the produce as against the prevalent half and half arrangement between the sharecroppers and the landlords. To write this history, he used accounts from documents, newspapers, journals, books, participant-testimonies in an acute construction of lengthy quotations and a sequencing of disparate episodes and spatial irruptions into a political question for the present. This statement sequenced the past of ‘Tebhaga’ politics while retaining the episodic nature and local colour of each insurrection.

While discussing the leadership of the local struggles, Ray never mentioned the Communist Party of India: he named the local leaders and the rank and file of the party in the areas of struggle. He stated the ‘lessons of Tebhaga’: From initiation till its end, the programme of this movement remained temporary survival by snatching crops. The Communist programme of unencumbered freedom for the peasants – declaring that the feudal exploitation of landlords, intermediaries and moneylenders could only end if the state of foreign and indigenous capitalists and landlords was destroyed – was never disclosed to the struggling sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. Partial triumphs became the absolute end of the movement. Corresponding organisational

innovations were not formalised. The necessity of working class leadership in the struggle for agrarian revolution was never reiterated to workers and peasants. The struggling tillers of Tebhaga were denied the support of available Communist axioms. They were banned from developing their understanding that anti-feudal struggle for agrarian revolution had to be protracted. This betrayal stopped the peasants from adopting the tactics of long-drawn guerrilla warfare or people's war. Facing the guns and columns of well-trained military and police personnel with stick and spears 'may exude mythological valour and courage', but victory could not be consolidated as such. Where the people lacked all forms of infrastructure and the enemy's armoury was replete with firepower, guerrilla warfare or people's war was the sole prescription for the struggling people.<sup>1187</sup> Ray was drawing from the thought and experience of the Chinese revolution and Mao Tse-tung (1893- 1976) which was proscribed by the Communist leadership. Only in Telangana and Andhra (in the late stages of Tebhaga Bengal, too) local partisans delved into the banned ideas. In the very last paragraph of the book Ray named the Communist party controlled by the central leadership, in this vein: "Though this peasant struggle started spontaneously it was later organised and led by CPI. Hence the responsibility for the success or failure of this movement applies to the party. The main duties of the party were political and organisational. The party failed in both these tasks. The workers and peasants were denied access to the Communist idea that agrarian revolution was their common programme. The military strategy, i.e. *people's liberation war*, necessary to sustain the struggle was neither debated nor deployed. The struggle of the peasants did not lack in vision, courage and consistency. Without a true Communist Party and betrayed by a central leadership frightened to take the struggle to political plane, Tebhaga had to fail and the peasants had to give up."<sup>2</sup> But local Communist peasants – unlike the leadership – were committed to the method of red zones of revolutionary power (in Lalgonj, in Moyomonsingho)<sup>3</sup>. Let us read a frame captured by Ray.

Sonarpur-Bhangar area, 1949, was the estate of Congress Minister Hem Naskar. The 'Noble' was also a powerful fish-merchant. Despite owning huge stretches of wetlands, he deliberately jammed rivulets to create more for his fish business. Fields got swamped and peasants were evicted. He was earning a fortune simply by killing off tillers whose cultivable land was shrinking alarmingly fast. Every piece of currency that 'the shark' Hem Naskar accumulated was a concrete form of the blood and nutrition lost by the peasants. He was joined in his profitable pursuits by the secretary of Indian National Congress in 24 Parganas, Hridaybhusan Chakraborty. Other collaborators and jotdars of the region were Bhupati Naskar and Sricharan Napte. This was a cruel regime. Peasants were evicted at will, those who found work were often paid close to nothing, and starvation was common. Sixty years old Ramanath Mondol died after starving for ten days. Before his death, he went to the houses of moneylenders and landlords of the area to ask for food. All he received was severe thrashing. His death was an eye-opener for all poor peasants. They realised that passivity meant certain starvation and death; crops would have to be seized forcibly. Like in the adjoining Kakdweep pro-Communist slogans to capture and redistribute crops from the storehouses of the rich started reverberating in Sonarpur. In Banagram, Beota, Batabari villages, collectives of hungry peasants captured the storehouses of landlords and moneylenders. Hundreds of *mon* of paddy was redistributed. Peasant volunteer squads were formed. A People's Court decided to confiscate the assets of the landlords, jotdars and moneylenders. The latter were arrested by the peasant

squads. When the first big wave of state aggression arrived the volunteer squads chased the police away, but not before beating the police up adequately. Struggle committees were formed in all villages. Land was distributed to agricultural workers and sharecroppers *mouja*-wise. The popularity of local Communist partisans was profound. The movement to occupy the fishing sites from the Congress leaders and the rural rich began in right earnest. The intention was to drain saline water away and re-cultivate the plots. In Tihuria, Nayabad, Kheyada, and Saheber Abad – such occupation ensued. The main leader of the fishery-workers was a worker from Saheber Abad Number 2 of Sonarpur, Tulsi Naskar. Large-scale local police attacks were foiled by the people, but Moti Dhara and Dashu Mondol were martyred. Five hundred armed police from the district-level had to camp and torture the local people for three months to stifle the struggle. Rape, murder and arrests became rampant.<sup>4</sup>

In early 1980s, Ray chronicled this area on the fringes of Calcutta - partly urbanised from that very decade. As minuscule as such attention might seem, this area has remained an intermittent flashpoint between a robust Muslim and lower-caste peasantry and the Indian state (regional ministries of both CPI-M – 1977-2011 – and Trinamool Congress or T.M.C 2011 onwards) up till 2018.<sup>5</sup> That the slogan of encircling statist cities with revolutionary villages popularised during Naxalbari struggle in the 1960s<sup>6192</sup> was not a simple hyperbole, was amply demonstrated in Ray's account of this liberated zone close to Calcutta.

From 1951 till the early 1980s, Ray continued to support the principle of people's war. Ray in many ways was a rather simple and dogged thinker. In this trail he was able to threaten the state with the convergenceless multiplicity of the political surface and even inaugurated them in the realm of knowledge. The finest example was where Ray narrated an account of martyr Rashmoni. He collected and rephrased the story from Pramathanath Gupta, who was one of the local partisans of Tebhaga struggle in Moyomonsingho, and wrote a book called *Muktijuddhe Adibashi* (Indigenous People's Struggle for Freedom). The meaning of Moyomonsingho in Ray's world was: "In the history of this country there are three places: Telangana, Kakdweep and Hajong area of Moyomonsingho. These massive bonfires once spread in different directions of the country and are still a source of fear for the landlords and jotdars and the allied ruling classes. These places can invigorate the drained and desperate workers, peasants and ordinary masses, the workers' struggle against retrenchment and fair wage, sharecroppers and poor peasants struggling against the jotdars and against eviction, agricultural workers fighting for wage-hike. These three proposed a highly matured form of militant struggle of workers and peasants. And none of these were absolutely singular. These were related to the anti-colonial struggle that was prevalent in nineteenth-century colonial India, to the 1932 rebellion of Saotal peasants in Dinajpur and Malda; to the rebellion of the Riyang peasants in Tripura in 1942. Tebhaga was acting on the programme of eradicating the landlord-jotdar system in agrarian Bengal for good."<sup>7</sup>

We can remember that Suprakash Ray or Bijan Sen posited the contradiction between Communist leadership and the ordinary partisan as the key to understanding how politics could be or could not be thought, proposed and practiced. In his report on martyr Rashmoni, a Hajong woman, Ray captured the subjective resources and constant innovation that had ordinary partisans in colonial India inventing politics defying the proscriptive regime of the Communist leadership. We go through his report.

In eastern Bengal the Garo Hills lay verdant on the northern borders of Moyomonsingho district. Tribal communities like Hajong, Garo, Dalu and Koch inhabited this area in the early twentieth century – controlled by the Susanga landlords of Moyomansingho. A few centuries earlier these landlords brought in the Hajongs from distant mountainous tracts. They captured wild elephants for the landlords. The Hajongs continued to hold the position of landless share croppers and agricultural labourers. Irrespective of yearly produce they had to give the landlords a predetermined portion of the harvest each year. The Hajong peasants had to toil without wage for the landlords and placate them with gifts. Even if lack of rain or excessive rain damaged the crop the Hajong peasants had to deliver the dictated amount to the landlords. When they failed the land tilled by them was taken away. As a result, death from starvation was inevitable in many families. This mode of exploitation was called Tonk system. Between the landlords and the peasants there was a complex pattern of intermediaries and money lenders who unabashedly exploited the Hajong peasants. In Haluaghat and Nanitabari villages of this region there were instances of a peasant's three *bigha* land being grabbed in exchange of an umbrella or a spade or some amount of salt. There were days of rituals when the peasants used to worship the landlord – on those days the women from the house of a Hajong leader washed the feet of the landlords and wiped them with their tress. This exploitation and oppression, nourished and reared by the colonial rule, came under the onslaught of the India-wide peasant struggle of 1937-38. As the Hajong peasants woke up, the 'Permanent Settlement' of Moyomansingho became precarious. Inspired by the efforts of the new local Communists the Hajong peasants along with Garo, Dalu, Banai, Koch and Muslim peasants started a movement that quickly spread into 300 villages of North Moyomonsingho. The demands were abolition of Tonk system and obtaining tenurial rights for the peasants. As the movement gathered momentum between 1938 and 1945, the revolutionary consciousness of Hajong peasants intensified. They refused to pay illegal taxes in the local markets set up by the landlords and their intermediaries and even started constructing market-spaces. They also won back rights to forestry and fishing in common natural areas. The local militia of the landlords was defeated by the Hajong peasants. From 1946, the struggle of the Hajong peasants united with Tebhaga movement and the concrete symbol of this higher revolutionary struggle was Hajong Mata (mother) Rashmoni. In the entire sequence of revolutionary struggle and its woman militants, Martyr Rashmoni was 'undoubtedly the leading figure'. In Bogabari village, Bhedipura region of Susanga subdivision, Rashmoni was born in a poor Tonk peasant's household. When she was twelve, she was married off to another poor young Tonk peasant – who died soon after. The Hajongs of her village used to call her a witch because of this misfortune. In Hajong society widow remarriage, divorce and remarriage, living together without brahmanical rituals of marriage were prevalent. Rashmoni opted for a solitary existence. Devoid of financial security or resource Rashmoni had to sow and cut crops in other sharecroppers' plots and earned a small amount of paddy as wage. Then she ground out rice grains from the paddy and sold the same in local market. She used to collect wood from the forests to sell them and also to save for the winter. In her 'leisure', she weaved clothes for the poor Hajong women. 'Rashmoni the witch' performed another noble task. She provided the best technical help to women giving birth in and around her area. Whenever she learned about a woman suffering from birth pangs or attendant complications she rushed in to facilitate a smooth birth and mellow the pain of the mothers. She was a healer for the weak newborns and their weak mothers. Rashmoni interacted with the old men and women of the community and learnt about the medicinal and therapeutic properties of various substances. She became indispensable for the local Hajong community. The

Second World War curved a new path in Rashmoni's life. The war was destroying the very fabric of Bengal's already precarious social and familial structure. Mass struggles were throbbing all over the country. The toiling multitude was gathering within various mass organizations. Women were mobilised by local Communist partisans under the flag of self-defence committees. Rashmoni joined such a committee. During the famine of 1943 Rashmoni led squads to roam and collect paddy, rice, money and clothes from all over her subdivision. She also led Hajong peasants in locating the secret stocks of food in the black marketeers' and hoarders' precincts. She ran a mass kitchen with the collected and confiscated items. Radical initiatives to resist famine, like 'grow more food crops', 'cut canals', 'build dams' were also led by Rashmoni. Rashmoni and the self-defence committee set up a common collective grain-store and centre for cottage industries in her village. Rashmoni understood that the landlords and his intermediaries could exploit the Hajong peasants easily because the Hajongs were inadequately educated. Rashmoni proposed to open a night-school for people from all age groups. Such a school was indeed opened; Rashmoni was its primary organiser and the first student. Soon innumerable Hajongs thronged the school both for basic education and political debates. All through the day there were processions and propaganda and the nights were for reading, writing and discussing politics. In no time, Rashmoni was able to build a highly politically conscious revolutionary group. She was also in charge of women's emancipatory movement in the region. As this local revolutionary groundswell merged with the Bengal-wide Tebhaga movement Rashmoni's brilliant oratory skill, her mobilisational prowess and her radical itinerant living contributed to the eradication of landlordism, money lending and colonial police-system from sizeable tracts of Moyomonsingho: it became a people's liberated zone. Soon the military might of the colonial state was summoned. The Eastern Frontier Rifle Force instituted a generalized state of murder, pillage, rape, and crop-burning. Resolutely, the Hajongs – led and inspired by Rashmoni – devised a variant of guerrilla tactics with local weapons against a brutal army with developed weaponry and firearms. In the battle of Baheratoli along with many brave Hajongs, Rashmoni lost her life but not before beheading the very enemy soldier who tortured Hajong daughter Saraswati. In this battle the colonial army retreated and the Hajongs snatched firearms from them.<sup>8</sup>

This was typical of Ray's historical enquiries. In this one obscure episode or character of Tebhaga struggle in Bengal, Ray recommenced many a theme of multiplicity – womanhood, gender roles, cultural norms of the oppressed, the will of inversion in life and ritual of the oppressed communities, internal contradictions in communitarian settings, and strategic abnegation of sexuality while retaining the primacy of birth (Rashmoni's dynamic lines of mobility were related to her intimate access as a facilitator of child delivery). Ray confidently evaded an exclusive anthropologising of the episode or denying Rashmoni or the Hajongs coevalness<sup>9</sup>, recognising that Hajong politics had its own thought of singularity irreducible to the vitality of life and the dualism of body and language – the latter coupling dissipated in the face of the decision of murder and/or sacrifice. In terms of late colonial history, such insurrectionary episodes became local resistance against 'communal' violence time and again. Rather than the demand of economic justice, it was the politics and control over quasi-liberated areas of Tebhaga struggle that acted as solid bulwarks against the local implication of the 1947 partition and communal strife. "The insurgent peasants of Bagerhat, Khulna stood up against communal riots. The 60 year old, blind Yasin Fakir of Moubhog and lower caste leader Giridhar Mondol became volunteers to retain communal harmony. Rural partisans mellowed down tensions by holding village-level meetings in all

areas. Moubhog area saw no communal riot. Thousands of peasants started cutting crop with red flags hoisted all around. In the Sudder precincts, in Bagerhat and Satkhira sub-zones Tebhaga movement was massive. It spread across Rupsa and Baherhati rivers to Chitalmari, Kochua, Rampal, Sarankhola, Boteghata, Dakon areas in the south.”<sup>10</sup> The Communist leadership – by abdicating and hiding the clear programme of agrarian revolution – did not allow similar politics to deepen and spread in different volatile areas of colonial territories. It remained an appendage to Congress and Muslim League in a particularly distorted and limited understanding of the problem of nationalities in British Empire – and was instrumental in letting the involuted and reactive violence of 1946-47 thrive and detonate.

1 Suprakash Ray, *Tebhaga Sangram* (Tebhaga Struggle, *TS*), Radical Impression, Revised Edition (based on notes made in the 1960s): 1983, Reprint: 2009, P-79.

2 *Ibid*, P-80.

1) 3 24 Parganas District Committee of Communist Party, *Banglar Sishu Telangana: Lalganj* (The Budding Telangana in Bengal: Lalganj), November 5, 1949.

4 *TS*, P-75-76.

1) 5 Alik Chakraborty, Spokesperson (*Jomi, Jibika, Bastutantra O Poribesh Raksha Committee* or Committee for the Protection of Land, Livelihood, Ecology and Environment), Announcement of protest programmes culminating in indefinite road blockade at Bhangor, 4. 1. 17; Amiya K Chaudhuri, “TMC Dethrones the LF in West Bengal after Thirty-four Years of Uninterrupted Rule”, in Paul Wallace ed. *India's 2014 Elections: A Modi-led BJP Sweep*, Sage India, 2015; *Odhikar* (Organ of Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights), January-February 2017.

6 See Bibliography I.B.68-126, 128-137 in in Agnibho Gangopadhyay, *Biography of a Pseudonym: Suprakash Ray, Bengal, 1915-1990*, A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of History, University of Oxford In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, September 2018.

7 *TS*, P-50.

8 *Ibid*, P-38-44.

6) 9 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983, P-25-35.

10 *TS*, P-28-29.