

Midnapore

Midnapore had a long tradition of anti-colonial struggles, where peasants had played very important role. During the non-cooperation movement (1921-22) peasants were mobilized by the Congress leader B.N. Sashmal against taxation. During the civil disobedience movement, Midnapore witnessed several confrontations between the sharecroppers and the jotedars and the Congress leaders had to intervene often to mediate. When Quit India was launched, Midnapur (particularly Contai and Tamluk subdivision) emerged as a crucial site. The tradition of peasant resistance continued during the Tebhaga Movement (1946-47) and Tebhaga rights were established extensively in this district.

The participation of local women during the anti-colonial struggles and also during the Tebhaga Movement in Midnapore is particularly important. We all are familiar with the iconic image of Matangini Hazra. Perhaps lesser known to us is Bimala Maji, who gave local leadership during the Tebhaga struggle. After the devastating famine of 1943, Bimala began her political career, inspired by Manikuntala Sen. Her primary task was to build party networks among local women through relief and rehabilitation of the destitute, building resistance against wife-beating and sensitizing them against zaminadari oppression. Under the direction of the party, she worked in Nandigram. She also led first women's procession in demand of Tebhaga and supporting communal harmony. As the Tebhaga Movement intensified, under Bimala's leadership women successfully confronted the guardsmen of the local zamindar. When the major Kishan Sabha leaders of Midnapore were arrested, Bimala's role went beyond mobilizing local women exclusively and she took larger party decisions. Just before independence she was arrested and spent two and half years in jail.¹ Women's participation in Communist politics remained significant in 1950s and 1960s. During Naxalbari movement also, women participated in large number.

1950s

The radical peasant struggles persisted in the years immediately after independence. The *Times of India*, for instance, reported on January 29 (1950) about an attack on the police station by "two thousand villagers armed with spears, bows and arrows." The reporter further noted that the attackers were all "Reds", i.e., Communists. In 1953 peasants of the district tried to build up a movement against the arbitrary eviction of the sharecroppers by the big land owners. Moreover, there was a custom in some villages, known as Sajabandha, which forced the peasants to store their meagre harvests in the houses of zamindars and jotedars. Zamindars would then distribute the crops to the peasants according to the formers' will. This practice was prevalent in Chandrakona and Dharendra region. Under the CPI leader Deben das, peasants successfully built up a movement against this practice in 1953.²

¹ Peter Custers, 'Women's Role in Tebhaga Movement', *EPW*, 21:43, 1986, WS 97-WS104.

² As told by Santosh Rana and Chapal Bhattacharya (an ex-CPI member from Midnapore town).

Throughout the decade of 1950s, Midnapore remained a CPI (Communist Party of India) stronghold. Under the auspices of the party and the *Kishan Sabha* unit, the district witnessed several phases of peasant mobilization. Santosh Rana, the present District Secretary of CPI, noted in an interview that during the Congress rule, peasant movements continued against Jotedars and Zamindars of the district. Tamluk, Mahishadal, Potashpur, Khejuri, Banshdamohanpur, Garbeta, Agra, Chandrakona and Bankra were the major epicentres of peasant resistance. CPI, at this point, was also mobilizing people against caste discrimination and practices of untouchability.

Midnapore town witnessed three important resistance movements under CPI leadership in 1952: a) movement in demand of political prisoners – Primarily centred at Midnapore town, the movement also had some impact in Tamluk, Kanthi and Garbeta. It involved public meetings and signature campaigns and was mainly limited to the educated *bhadraloks*. Similar demands were raised from other districts as well and government did release the political prisoners. B) 'Save education' movement – this was against the governmental retrenchment policy particularly in the primary school level. A Midnapore District Save Education Committee was formed under the leadership of peasant leaders Deben Das and Nikunja Choudhury. Participation came from the Forward Block, Krishak Praja Party, Jansangh, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti and Krishak Sabha and they placed a 4 point demands before the education department. C) Deben Das and Bhupal Panda also organised a food movement in the Midnapore town protesting against arbitrary seizure of paddy and cordon system. A successful strike, with significant participation from women and students, was an important event of this movement. In February 1954, when teachers movement gained momentum in Calcutta, the teachers of Midnapore district, particularly that of Midnapore town, also participated in large number. The leadership came from Deben Das. Das, primarily a peasant leader from CPI, was successful in organizing civil society movements throughout early '50s. Teachers and students remained an important constituency for years to come for the Communist Party in Midnapore. In mid 1960s, Kamakshya Nandan Das Mahapatra, an important student leader from CPI, led students agitation in Midnapore town, demanding for free primary education, cheap canteen, cheap store for stationary etc.³

In 1956 West Bengal witnessed mobilization for and against Bengal-Bihar merger. While the agitators, who were in favour of this merger, in order to alleviate the space crunch in West Bengal (particularly given the massive refugee influx), had the support of Bidhan Roy's Government, opposition came primarily from the CPI. Midnapore, being a CPI stronghold, witnessed intense mobilization against the proposed merger. Biplab Maji, son of local CPI leader Ananta Maji, writes:

Communist Party gave leadership to the state wide anti merger movement. Party sent my mother to the nearby villages to mobilize local people for this anti-merger

³ Personal interview with Santosh Rana.

movement. Everyday processions of poor peasants and tribals reached Midnapore town under the leadership of the party. Their slogan was “We won’t allow the merger of Bengal and Bihar”. In January 1956 CPI called for Bandhs against Bidhan Roy Ministry that was supporting the merger. Processions of villagers used to come to Midnapore town daily. I also walked with them. First destination was the party office at Mirbazar. From there we went to various major crossings of the town to finally go to the court, where we would stage civil disobedience. Everyday someone or the other leader of CPI used to lead the procession. The biggest procession was lead by young Communist leader Daru Mukherjee. The people of Midnapore would greet us with flowers and women would blow conch shells. They would mark our foreheads with sandalwood paste *tika*. As the movement against merger gained strength, Bidhan Roy also backtracked saying that even if the merger happened it would not mean imposition of one language and one culture....Communists convinced people about the pitfalls of this proposal. This would only help the capitalists but would be against minority interests.... On 11 February a anti merger convention took place at the Senate Hall of Calcutta where peasants, labourers, intellectuals from all the districts of West Bengal came. My mother also attended it with other district leaders. On 24th February the movement reached its peak in our district. My mother lead processions of villagers almost everyday between 21 January and 24th February, even when there was Cr. PC 144 in Midnapore town.⁴

Even after February 1956, anti merger agitation under the Communist leadership continued in Midnapore district. The Congress supporters and the CPI supporters clashed in Nandigram on March 30 (1956). At that time Midnapore District Congress political conference was taking place in Nandigram, when 300 strong anti-merger demonstrators reached the venue shouting slogans against the proposed merger. 3 people were injured as ‘coconut shells and brickbats were freely used in the clash’.⁵ Reorganization of state boundaries had become a country wide issue in mid 1950s. On January 25, 1956 Bidhan Chandra Roy and Sri Krishna Sinha in a joint statement had called for Bengal Bihar merger. The Communists, supporting linguistic reorganization of the states, took to the street against this declaration. Leaders like Saroj Mukherjee, Jyotish Joardar, Jatin Chakraborty were arrested in connection with this movement.

Next landmark event in the left politics of West Bengal and that of Midnapore was the food movement of 1959. Though Calcutta and Howrah emerged as the major epicentres, “the first phase of

⁴ Biplab Maji, Manuscript of his memoir, no pagination, personally collected from the author.

⁵ *TOI*, 31 March 1956.

civil disobedience movement began on 14 July 1959 when people of Midnapore town, Ghatal, Khejuri, Contai, Tamluk, Garbeta, Bhagabanpur under the joint leadership of the CPI and PIFRC picketed before law courts and Block Development Offices”.⁶ Since 1957, CPI supporters were preparing ground for building a wide spread movement against the increasing food prices and food scarcity in the state. Midnapore was one of the major districts where they focused. From 1958 the town Midnapore witnessed frequent processions, *gheraos* and strikes in protest of the food policy of the government. As instructed by the party many Communist leaders of the district went underground in 1958. But the party office remained the centre of activities. Ananta Maji, by then a prominent face, went underground. But his wife with their children was staying in the party office with his mother at that point. Biplab Maji remembered vividly the days of food movement in Midnapore:

My mother was a key figure in the food movement in our district. We as kids were involved too. We used to work as messengers and carried confidential letters between our books. People from various *paras* of Midnapore town and from Kharagpur sent rotis and jaggery to the party office. Villagers from all over the district used to reach the office in the early morning. They were fed there. The volunteers would oversee the whole system. After eating they would go in processions to the court area at around 10 am to lodge civil disobedience. Initially the police was active and many of them were arrested. But the capacity of the prison was limited. So the police vans would round them up and would take them to some distant area and drop them there. Then they had to walk back all the way to the town and from there to their villages. The rickshaw-walas of Midnapore town provided great help at this time. Poor women of the slum areas also supported the movement. They used to collect wheat and prepared the rotis in large scale. Nilima Kundu (wife of famous oil mill owner Anil Kundu⁷), Sushama Pati (wife of Hiranmoy Pati), Renu Mashi, Bose Ginni, Turi Mashi, Asha Mashi and many others were part of the food collection team. The railway workers of Kharagpur sent food regularly. One day, I remember, we heard in the middle of the night that police had beaten up CPI supporters. My mother along with some party members and well wishers went to see the situation. Ramakanta Kundu and Malik Singh went with her. They were severely beaten up by the police. They were not Communists before. But the food movement and police atrocities made them so.⁸

The above description gives us a sense of the composition of the people who participated in the food movement of 1959. Workers and peasants, women and children of families coming from various backgrounds, slum dwellers came together in demand of food in affordable price. During the food movement of 1966 too, Midnapore remained a site of struggle. In early February of 1966 *Dainik*

⁶Suranjan Das and Premankshu K. Bandyopadhyay (Eds.) *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting a Turning Point in the History of West Bengal*, K P Bagchi, Kolkata, 2004, 6.

⁷ A Congress supporter who later became the supporter of CPI.

⁸ Biplab Maji, Manuscript of his memoir, no pagination, personally collected from the author.

Basumati reported that one sub divisional officer and one magistrate was manhandled in Midnapore by the angry mob and they looted the procured food grains. This was not surprising given that Midnapore remained perpetually poverty stricken. *The Times of India* reported that around three hundred thousand persons in Khejuri, Nandigram and Bhagwanpore were on the verge of starvation in mid-1953.⁹ The same newspaper reported about “many deaths” due to severe scarcity of food in Gopiballavpur area in mid-1953.¹⁰ Throughout the same decade, the district was repeatedly hit by natural disasters like flood and cyclone (1950, 1953, 1956). Consequently, Midnapore had remained a fertile ground for oppositional politics in 1950s and 1960s.

Naxal Movement in Midnapore

Midnapore was perhaps bound to become an important site of Naxalite Movement. Indeed, Gopiballavpur – Debra region emerged as one of the most important sites of radical politics towards the end of 1960s. Living amidst abject poverty and never ending debts, peasants of Midnapore warmed up to the Naxalite ideology quite soon. As Lebachand Tudu, a tribal peasant leader of Naxal movement from Patbandha village of Gopiballavpur area remembered,

I come from very poor region. My family was eternally repaying one loan or the other to the local zamindar Sudhir Bhuian and Sushil Bhuian. My father had become old but he had to work. We used to feel very bad. But we could not do anything. Bhuians were very oppressive. One day they forcibly took two of our cows, though me and my brother resisted to the end. We had to give up at the end because our family had borrowed money from them. Amidst this came the news of Naxalbari incident. We felt hopeful because it was a movement against the zamindars. Santosh Rana and some other students from Calcutta came to mobilize locals. I was 24 or 25 at that point. I came in contact of Santosh Rana.¹¹

The leadership came from the radical youths, many of who were from elite institutions of Calcutta and some were locals who had been exposed to Charu Mazumdar’s ideology while studying in Kharagpur, Midnapore or Calcutta. Santosh Rana, who hailed from this region and was educated in the University of Calcutta, was an important Naxalite leader in Gopiballavpur. The other prominent face was his brother Mihir Rana. Then there was Asim Chatterjee (known as *kaka*), who was then the secretary of the Bengal – Bihar – Orissa Frontier Local Committee.

The first task of these students was to win the trust of the locals, create awareness among the poor peasants about the ideology and possible modes of movement, mingle with the local peasants and

⁹*TOI*, 16 June 1953.

¹⁰*TOI*, July 1953.

¹¹ Interview of Lebachand Tudu, published in Amar Bhattacharya (Ed.) *Lal Tamshuk: Naxalbari Andolonar Pramanyo tathya Sankalan*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2014, pp 260-261.

understanding the socio political realities of the region. The second phase consisted of guerrilla warfare and annihilation of the class enemies (often termed as “action”). Towards the end of September 1969, three successful “actions” took place in which jotedars and zamindars were targeted. The first action took place in the village of Dharampur on September 2, 1969. According to *Deshabrati* of April 23, 1970 total 22 “class enemies” were annihilated by end of 1969. The success of these “actions” and the killings of the notorious zamindars enthused local peasants and helped in strengthening CPI(ML) in this region.

Gopiballavpur region witnessed another mode of resistance that was quite unique of this region. In Santosh Rana’s words this was a “harvesting festival”. He writes, “Between the third week of November and mid-December, 1969 in Gopiballavpur *thana* of south western corner of West Bengal a festival took place – a festival to gain control over the food grain, to destroy feudal structure of land relations, to destroy the power and the influences of the zamindars and jotedars, to reveal the true colours of the revisionists in the state power.”¹² More than twenty thousand peasants participated in this struggle to take possession of the crops. In another estimate we find that around 40,000 peasants participated in the ‘harvest festival’.¹³ Tudu recalls,

Bhalukshulia, Shalajhuria, Kayashol, Ludhirshol, Mohorboni, Panihia, Machabandha and many more villages came together. We used to have secret meetings, in remote backward villages. Zamindars did not get any information about these meetings. We used to talk about land and crops. Peasants were really excited. Initially we robbed the crops from the fields in the middle of the night. Then annihilation and taking control of zamindar’s properties was also a part of our programme. The peasants participated enthusiastically. The money lending zamindars were prime targets. In this region Nagen Senapati and Bhupen Senapati were notorious as moneylenders. They also had rifles. They were killed and the mortgaged properties were confiscated by the peasants. Everyone got back whatever they had mortgaged to the Senapatis. We became very popular among the poor peasants. They realised that we were their true well wishers. The harvest festival spread beyond the borders and villagers in Bihar and Orissa were also enthused...4-5 of us took control over the area. We could maintain our authority for 7 days.¹⁴

As the peasants’ resistance gained momentum, arms were seized from the zamindars and jotedars, they were tried in “people’s court” and punished according to their levels of crime. However, Charu Mazumdar criticized the “harvest festival” as a “reactionary” initiative. “Action” against individual zamindars and moneylenders was projected as the only way for advancing the cause of revolution. Popular movement was looked down upon as “reactionary” initiatives. Consequently, Tudu tells us,

¹²Santosh Rana, ‘Gopiballavpur-e Fasal Katar Obhyuthhan, 1969’ in Rana, *Samaj Sreni Rajniti*, Camp, Kolkata, 2006, 132.

¹³ Tarunde Deb Bhattacharya, *Medinipur*, p.48. Firma K L M Ltd, Kolkata.

¹⁴ Tudu, 262.

“The number of attacks on zamindars increased rapidly. I think at least 120 zamindars were killed in the entire district....Too much emphasis on action slowed down our movement. We all went underground. There were warrants in our names.”¹⁵ Mazumdar’s emphasis on annihilation did not go well with the local leaders like Santosh Rana and prominent student leader Ranabir Samaddar who was also working from that area.

In Debra the leadership came from Gunadhar Murmu, a local tribal leader who had been associated with CPIM earlier and Bhabdeb Mandal, an advocate by profession who had contested unsuccessfully the 1967 election as CPIM candidate. Unlike Gopiballavpur, where the top leaders were mainly the city bred students, Debra witnessed local political leaders taking up the cause of Naxalbari. Before getting associated with Naxalbari, Mandal and Murmu had participated in numerous economic struggles, particularly around the demand for fare wage for sharecroppers.

In Debra, the first incident happened on October 1, 1969 when the house of jotedar Kanai Kuity was surrounded by a thousand of local tribal peasants under the leadership of Murmu. While Kuity managed to escape, his house was ransacked and all the documents related to his landed properties was burnt down. By the end of that month Naxalites had conducted at least 4 armed “decoities” in which two landowners were killed.¹⁶

Initially the police was taken aback by the intensity of the movement. However, soon they began to gain control over the situation, and as Rana writes, in the name of establishing law and order, “the police took away whatever little the peasants owned – their cattle and poultry animals, money and utensils, paddy. The peasants who fought the jotedars bravely could not resist the huge state force. Many were arrested. At one point the number of imprisoned was twice the capacity of Midnapore jail.”¹⁷ Tudu echoes,

By November, December CRPF began to raid villages like Pitashao, Holbendua, Shalberia, our Kalajuria, Sarbachira, Patbandha. They were taking all the moveable properties from the peasants’ houses. Goats, chickens, paddy – everything. We did not have anything. We were staying at Bhalukshulia then. There were local pimps who used to help the C.R.P in identifying. They used to get a share of C.R.P.’s loot. They have earned quite a lot at that time.¹⁸

Despite their best efforts to evade the police, most of the senior leaders were arrested by 1970. The police got hold of Santosh Rana and Mihir Rana from Calcutta, Asim Chatterjee was arrested from Deoghar, Lebachand Tudu and his wife Koni Tudu were arrested from Kharagpur. In most cases,

¹⁵ Tudu, 263.

¹⁶ *TOI*, 24 October 1969.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 137.

¹⁸ Tudu, 264.

someone or the other from the party informed the police regarding the whereabouts of the Naxal leaders. Charu Mazumdar's emphasis on annihilation, disregard for popular movements like "harvest festival" and the increasing police brutality in the villages had alienated the Naxalites from the local people:

Initially we used to take into account people's opinion and wishes – for example capturing the crop. But the policy of annihilation or what we called action did not involve people. As if we were doing these actions in the name of people and for the people. People had no role to play. But they had to face police atrocities. They probably thought that because of us they were now suffering. When we opposed the oppression of the jotedars, people supported us. But the police robbed them. The Naxals could not or did not resist that. This was the blunder. We could not resist the state oppression and people did not take that well. We could not arm the common people also. They became mere spectators.¹⁹

Ranabir Samaddar also shares a similar opinion:

If we had focused more on people's struggle, if we had decided that we would not follow the annihilation line but focus on strengthening our base among the people, who knows what would happen. The movement might have lived longer. Then there was the total repression, the white terror of the government.²⁰

The government, it seems, adopted a carrot and stick policy to suppress the movement. "The villages where the movement was strong started receiving aid. Many families received money and cattle. Our family too got two cows. They also expanded the irrigation system,"²¹ noted Tudu while discussing the reasons for the decline of their movement in Gopiballavpur. Moreover, the threat of CPI(M) in Midnapore was increasing. "CPI(M) penetrated in this region. They used to tell people that if they did not support them against us, major attacks will happen. People felt threatened."²²

Midnapore jail, with a massive number of Naxalite prisoners, became a major site of political and social activities. As Samaddar remembers: "we used to take regular classes with 20-30 students. We taught them to read. But we also took political classes, discussed *Red Book*."²³ But Midnapore Jail became the site of more radical activities as well like attempts of prison break. We read in the *Times of India* of December 18, 1970:

Eight prisoners were killed in a series of violent incidents leading to firing by jail warders at the Midnapore central jail yesterday. Twelve others, including two warders, were injured.

¹⁹ Tudu, 268-269.

²⁰ Samaddar, interview in *Anustup*

²¹ Tudu, 268.

²² Ibid.

²³ Samaddar's interview, 462.

According to information received at the secretariat today, the trouble was engineered by some Naxalite under trials who, in collusion with other prisoners, attempted a jail break in accordance with their party's programme.

Among the killed three were known Naxalites. Inquiries are being made about whether the others had any political affiliation. The deputy inspector general of police left for Midnapore today.

It is reported that at 1-30 p.m. yesterday some Naxalite undertrials in the jail compound hoisted a red flag atop central tower of the jail and wrote some Naxalite slogans on the walls. They also tried to assault some warders....

But trouble erupted again in the evening when about 500 Naxalite and other prisoners who had assembled near the central tower turned violent. They broke open the kitchen and the store-room of the jail and made a bonfire of jail property.

...A spokesman of the State police said that the warders had opened fire and not the police.²⁴

Attempts of jail break would become a part of Naxalite programme in early 1970s.

Railway Workers in Kharagpur

While close connection and proximity with Midnapore town had shaped the political culture of Kharagpur in many ways, this railway town itself had a glorious tradition of workers' movement. We have already mentioned above how the popular protests organised in Midnapore town had received regular support from the railway workers of Midnapore. It is also important to take into account the politics of railway workers of Kharagpur when one talks of the popular politics of Midnapore district.

Kharagpur, a strategically important rail head that serves the entire ore and steel belt, connects Calcutta to Mumbai and Chennai and serves the ports of Vizag, Paradwip and Haldia, had been the major centre of the historic railway strike in 1974. Since 1947 Kharagpur remained a strong base for railway workers' political activities. As early as in 1949, 64 workers of Kharagpur workshop were arrested when they were trying to mobilize people for a railway strike on March 9 (1949) in demand of an increased dearness allowance. Many of the arrestees lost their jobs. Though the strike was not successful, a section of militant labour leaders and their followers began to organize large scale movements demanding better salary, dearness allowance and job security. In early 1956²⁵ and then again in 1957-58, Kharagpur was in turmoil. Continuous price increase without a corresponding hike in the wage had been the primary reason of workers' discontent. The Giri Maidan of Kharagpur

²⁴ *TOI*, 18/12/1970.

²⁵ The movement in 1956 initially began with the demand for "skilled artisan" status for 112 brush – hand painters who worked in workshop no. 36.

witnessed massive and frequent rallies led by Railwaymen's Federation. Telegu and Bengali speaking workers came out together in large number in demand for fare wage. The women of their families too attended meetings and processions. The whole railway town came together in support of the railway workers' demand. The leadership came from All India Railwaymen's Federation.

However, the culminating point in the railway workers struggles was the great 20 day long strike of 1974. Under the leadership of George Fernandez, 17 lakh workers struck work in demand of raise in pay scale and 12 hour working day for the loco-running staff. Kharagpur emerged as one of the major sites. Between May 8 and May 28 the railway town witnessed repeated confrontations between the strikers and the police, strikers and non-strikers/ strike breakers, secret meetings of workers and multiple arrests under MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act).²⁶ On 8th May itself, thousands of strikers were suspended in Kharagpur.²⁷ Despite arrests, suspension and police oppression the strike continued for 20 days. It was this strike, in which Ranabir Samaddar has located traces of Naxalite radicalism when he wrote,

As with several other politically climatic periods, the period of the Naxalite movement had a plural composition, even though it left in the minds of people and on society a singular impression of extremism, of an unbridled radical attitude and youth upsurge. These impressions were not pure myth, and had elements of reality in them. The movement had the participation of the peasants, students, youth, sections of lower middle classes, and workers. In this sense the popular movements of the decades of the 'fifties and early 'sixties culminated in radical upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, it will be important to see how these sectional participations played out in the upsurge as a whole, and how specific class participations varied, and how the workers movement, particularly the Great Railway Strike of 1974, was the movement of climax.²⁸

The traces of radicalization would remain in the politics of this region for decades to come as the recent incidents of Maoist insurgency in Jangalmahal or the Nandigram struggles would reveal.

²⁶The railway strike has been extensively studied by Ranabir Samaddar. See Samaddar, *The Crisis of 1974: Railway Strike and the Rank and File*, Primus, New Delhi, 2016.

²⁷ In this strike total number of suspension (including temporary) was 63, 796. *Medinipur Nana Chokhe*, p.168.

²⁸ Samaddar, 'Fifty Years After Naxalbari, Popular Movements Still Have Lessons to learn', *The Wire*, 6/3/2017.