

## PROPOSAL

### **Left Mobilisation in Three Districts of West Bengal, 1947-1977**

#### **Nadia, Midnapore, Birbhum**

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The nature and trajectories followed by left movements in the three post-independence/partition districts of Nadia, Midnapore and Birbhum do not always show homology. Yet, their constellation in the same analytic field of a research article brings out the rich dimensions and varied modalities of left mobilisation in post-1947 West Bengal. This, in turn, helps us to understand the chequered career of left activism— both parliamentary and non-parliamentary— and their wide-ranging political geographies. The research limits itself to 1977, the year the Left Front government won a massive majority in the Legislative Assembly polls and came to power.

#### **1. Nadia**

1.1 Partition and Nadia: The Radcliffe Line divided the district of Nadia and part of it fell within Pakistan. Being a border district, it had witnessed massive refugee influx since 1947. By 1951, Nadia had received more than 4 lakh refugees from various districts of East Bengal.<sup>1</sup> Bulk of the migrants came from Kushtia, the district that was created by splitting Nadia. Some of the biggest refugee camps were located in this district, like Coopers' Camp and Roopasri Camp in Ranaghat, Dhubulia and Chamta and much of the agitational politics of early 1950s was dominated by the refugees. Though traditionally a Congress stronghold, C.P.I. and R.C.P.I became increasingly popular with the coming of the refugees. Gradually, C.P.I. triumphed over R.C.P.I, particularly when the latter supported the governmental policy of dispersal of the refugees to faraway places like Andaman and Dandakaranya. When in 1959, Dandakaranya plan was declared, more than a thousand refugees of Dhubulia camp used to go the district magistrate's office daily to register protest. Their protest was organized by U.C.R.C. Refugee leaders of Nadia like Dinesh Majumdar and Subhash Basu would become important face of Communist politics of West Bengal. Apart from the Communists, Eastern India Refugee Council was also formed that followed

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<sup>1</sup> Subhasree Ghosh, *South Asia Research*, 34:2, 113-132, 120.

Jogendra Nath Mandal. Satyansaran Majumdar was another independent refugee leader from Nadia. Nadia's refugee politics thus provides us with a space to look into the contestations among various political parties and political leaders who tried to mobilize the refugees. Refugee politics is an underexplored area, particularly at the district levels. This paper will address this gap.

1.2 Food Movement in Nadia: Nadia, and particularly Krishnanagar, was one of the major sites of the food movement of 1966. Food scarcity and exorbitant prices had affected Nadia very badly. For instance, a day-long strike was observed on September 29, 1963 in protest of high prices of food grains in places like Nabadwip, Krishnanagar, Swarupganj, Samudragarh, Jahannagar and other areas. In 1965, the Bar Association of Nadia had demanded resignation of the Congress Ministry because of their utter failure in providing staple food at affordable prices. Apart from food grains, there was a severe crisis of kerosene oil as well in the mid-60s. West Bengal had witnessed a food movement in 1959 when Calcutta and Howrah were the major sites of troubles. The stage was set for a widespread agitation over food at fair price. On March 4, 1966, there were two students' processions in Krishnanagar – one with the students of Krishnanagar College and C.M.S School, and the other with Krishnanagar Polytechnic. When the two rallies were about to merge in front of the Krishnanagar Post Office, stones were thrown to a nearby police van. The police reacted by firing openly that killed a seventeen year old student, Ananda Hait. After Basirhat's Nurul Islam, he was the second martyr of the Food Movement of 1966. This will be the second moment that will be discussed in this paper. 1966 was very significant in the contemporary history of West Bengal. The food movement spread throughout West Bengal from Basirhat and Nadia and prepared the stage for the final defeat of the Congress Government in 1967, and, in many ways, for the Naxalbari Movement. In Nadia, particularly, most of the prominent student faces of the Food Movement joined CPI (ML) towards the end of 1960s.

1.3 Naxal Movement in Nadia: When the United Front came to power, conflicts within CPI (M) became apparent in Nadia. Direct confrontation occurred when the more radical section wanted to observe May Day in Congress-dominated refugee colony Shaktinagar near Krishnanagar. CPI(M) district committee objected to it. On the other hand, Nadia's food situation did not improve in any way even after the United Front came to power. In July that year, around 500 refugees from Dhubulia camp sat on rail track demanding food; on August 6 and August 8 Nabadwip Students'

Federation and Democratic Youth Federation of India submitted memorandum to the B.D.O demanding food; another memorandum was submitted to minister Charumihir Sarkar. Between August 11 and 14, trains were stopped, the district magistrate was 'gheraoed', the local B.D.O office was set on fire in Nabadwip. In clashes between the police and the students, 2 people were killed. A general strike was observed in Nabadwip on 12 August and Section 144 was imposed. Meanwhile, posters in support of Naxal Movement were put up in *Parichara Para*, *Dearapara*, *Malanchapara* and some other areas of Nabadwip. By September Naxalbari had influenced the students and youths of Shantipur as well. The Naxalite activities in Sahapara-Sarbanandipara of Shantipur Municipality area under the leadership of Ajay Bhattacharya, Kalachand Dalal, Kanai Bango, Madhusudan Chattopadhyay drew attention of the Chinese Press. Apart from Bhattacharya, all the other prominent leaders were from very poor families of Sahapara – Sarbanandipara and had significant influence on the local population. Shahstitala of Krishnanagar emerged as another strong hold around this time. Very important role was played by the students of the district, particularly those who were studying in Bipradas Pal Chowdhury Polytechnic of Krishnanagar. Some of the *bidi* workers like Keshto Biswas, Robi, Mani Adhikari also participated in the movement and went to the rural areas of the districts. Over next few years Nadia would witness the rise of new leaders, sporadic yet massive violence, police violence and attacks on police. The inner tension between the leaders, ideological conflicts and confusions of the radicals would also become apparent in these years. The paper will reflect upon the nature of Naxalbari Movement in Nadia as the third moment to understand popular political movements in this district.

## **2. Midnapore**

2.1 Midnapore had witnessed strong anti-colonial struggles in twentieth century. 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 radical peasant struggles continued 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”.

2.2 Midnapore remained backward and therefore conditions for peasants/subaltern uprisings were always there. *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.<sup>2</sup> The same newspaper reported about “many deaths” due to severe scarcity of food in Gopiballavpur area in mid-1953.<sup>3</sup> During the food movement of 1959, though Calcutta and Howrah emerged as the major epicentres, “the first phase of 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”.<sup>4</sup> During the food movement of 1966 also Midnapore remained a site of struggle. In early February of 1966 *Dainik Basumati* reported that one sub divisional officer and one magistrate was manhandled by the angry mob and they looted the procured food grains.

2.3 During the Naxalbari Movement, Gopiballavpur – Debra region became one of the most important sites. Towards the end of September 1969, three successful “actions” took place in which jotedars and zamindars were targeted. The success of these “actions” and the killings of the notorious zamindars enthused local peasants and helped in strengthening CPI (ML) in this region. The leadership came from the radical students and 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 Calcuta. Santosh Rana, a major Naxalite leader of West Bengal who hailed from this region 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

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<sup>2</sup> *TOI*, 16 June 1953.

<sup>3</sup> *TOI*, July 1953.

<sup>44</sup> Suranjan 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.

power.”<sup>5</sup> More than twenty thousand peasants participated in this struggle to take possession of the crops. As the struggle 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. 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.”<sup>6</sup>

2.4 Midnapore remained important as a site of peasant resistance in the political history of West Bengal even after Naxalbari. While poverty remained acute in many parts of Pashchim Midnapore<sup>7</sup> (starvation deaths in Amlasole for instance), radical left politics also retained some base as the recent Maoist activities in Lalgarh area reveals. On the other hand Nandigram (Purba Midnapore) had witnessed massive peasant resistance against state oppression in recent years. The long and almost continuous tradition of peasant militancy makes Midnapore a particularly interesting site of study. While the colonial politics of this region has received some amount of scholarly attention<sup>8</sup> and the recent events of Lalgarh and Nandigram too have been highlighted extensively in the media and discussed by the journalists, political activists, social scientists and civil right activists, the crucial three decades after independence remain understudied. This paper will be a modest attempt towards addressing this gap.

2.5 While discussing the popular movements in Midnapore district, it is important to look beyond the peasant resistance and explore the labour unrests, particularly in the railway town of Kharagpur. 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. It had been the major centre for railway strike in 1974. Between May 8 and May 28 the railway town witnessed repeated confrontations between the strikers and the police, secret meetings of workers and

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<sup>5</sup> Santosh Rana, ‘Gopiballavpur-e Fasal Katar Obhyuthhan, 1969’ in Rana, *Samaj Sreni Rajniti*, Camp, Kolkata, 2006, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>7</sup> The district was divided between Pashchim and Purba Midnapore in 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Works of Bidyut Chakrabarty, Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal are two examples.

multiple arrests under MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act).<sup>9</sup> Focusing on how the strike unfolded in Kharagpur, the nature of participation in the struggle and mobilization will also provide us with an entry point to the nature of trade unionism and labour movements in Bengal during the period under study.

### 3. Birbhum

Birbhum is among the least populated districts of West Bengal. Located at the north-west corner of south Bengal and sharing a long border with Jharkhand, Birbhum, even then, is home to 3,502,387 people (3.83 per cent of West Bengal's population), most of whom live off agricultural professions. By Tapan Choudhuri's estimate, 91.02 per cent of the population still live in villages and 75 per cent depend on agriculture.<sup>10</sup> There is no industry to speak of in this district, except for scattered cottage industries mostly in the Bolpur subdivision, the stone-crushing and ceramic industries of the Rampurhat block, and the Bakreswar Thermal Power Plant—the only heavy industry—in the westernmost reaches of the Dubarajpur block. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Birbhum has been witness to continuous peasants' movements and left mobilisation in the district has found its greatest expression through them.

Having said this, it must also be borne in mind that Birbhum—surrounded by the politically varied districts of Murshidabad, Malda and Burdwan—exhibits a curiously mixed political culture, electorally speaking. The Congress has traditionally had significant electoral successes in the northern parts of the district, whereas in the south and the west the left parties have fared better. Yet again, in the Bolpur town, the largest urban centre in Birbhum, the municipality has more or less remained with the Congress (and now Trinamool), though the eponymous Lok Sabha constituency has consistently returned a CPI(M) candidate since 1971 till 2009. This goes to confirm what has already been hinted at: it is the rural sectors in this district where the left parties had managed to build their sturdiest constituencies. Evidence for such mobilisation is legion and this research, which is still at a very preliminary stage of collecting documents and interviewing leaders, proposes to explore the nature and extent of this organisation in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

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<sup>9</sup> The 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.

<sup>10</sup> Tapan Choudhuri, *Unnoyoner Alope Birbhum, Pashchim Banga*, Birbhum Special Issue, pp. 59-74

In 1946, for instance, we already find the Fourth Birbhum District Peasants Conference being held at Ahmedpur. Here the peasant leader Krishnabinod Roy sent out an appeal to his “peasant brothers” to demand the abolition of zamindari without compensation, for the halving of the revenue demand, for the withdrawal of British soldiers and the release of political prisoners. He further appealed that a demand should be made for the distribution of all uncultivated land among landless poor peasants. He also addressed the weavers, fisherfolk, and the santals to make a range of demands for the uplift of their positions. His was not a voice in the wilderness. His appeal, like the appeal of other left peasant leaders, found deep resonance among the peasantry of Birbhum. By 1948, at a time when the Congress government at the Centre banned the Communist party, we find that the situation in Birbhum had become explosive. With the support of the Birbhum district Communist Party and under the leadership of members of the District Krishak Samiti, such as Kalipada Bashishta, Suren Banerjee, Keshab Das, Deben Roy, Sudhin Roy, Dharani Roy, Dwarik Banerjee, Sourin Mukherjee (Kumkum) and others, a powerful peasant movement spread its wings over Birbhum: in the villages along the banks of the Kopai river (Siur, Srinidhipur, Darpashila, Khanyerbari, Srichandrapur, etc.), in the Thiba, Jamna, Mahodari areas under Labpur Police Station, in Kirnahar and other villages under Nanoor Police Station, in Mallarpur and other villages under Mayureshwar Police Station, in Damra and other neighbouring villages of the Muhammadbazaar Police Station, in Deriapur and Kanchannagar of Sainthia Police Station, in Nagari and other villages under Suri Police Station, and in the Bhabanipur and Chandrapur areas under Rajnagar Police Station.

In the Damra village under Muhammadbazaar Police Station the agitation soon reached a flashpoint. Here leaders such as Deben Roy, Dharani Roy and Turku Hansda had organised a powerful peasant movement against the local jotedars and moneylenders around the issues of wages, demands of *tebhaga* and against usurious practices. The leaders were joined by Lapsa Hemram, Jatil Let, Baul Let, Ram Bauri, Shyam Bauri, Satyasadhan Das and Charu Mandal— all of whom dedicated themselves to organizing the agricultural labourers of the area. They also started a boycott movement against the jotedars. Terrified by the scale of mobilization, jotedar Sarojaksha Ghosal lodged a false diary with the local police station on 24 June 1949 against Deben Roy, Sourin Mukherjee and others, accusing them of theft, physical assault and other crimes. On the basis of this accusation, the head constable led a force which arrested Ruhi Das, Dukhu Let, Golab Let

and Baul Let the next day from Damra. The force then surrounded the house of Turku Hansda at the Nimpahari village and from there successfully apprehended Deben Roy, Sourin Mukherjee (Kumkum) and the then state president Saroj Hajra. They were all promptly carried away to the Damra Police camp. Reacting to this instance of police partiality towards the jotedar, thousands of peasants assembled under the leadership of Turku Hansda, who then led them, armed with bows and arrows, to the police camp. The police panicked at this considerable show of strength, clambered on to the roof of Mukti Bhattacharya's house, and opened fire from the top. In the 31 rounds that were fired, many were mortally wounded and Dashu Majhi, Kudno Majhi, Habol Let and Manik Let were killed. Mukti Let, who too was seriously wounded, succumbed to his injuries a day later at the Benagariya Hospital. These are the five martyrs of Damra, whose day of martyrdom (25 June) is celebrated as the "Damra Dibas" in various parts of Birbhum by the Krishak Sabha. The Mallarpur College has also been named Turku Hansda Lapsa Hemram Mahavidyalaya, honouring the contributions of these peasant leaders.

The martyrdom and the movement were not entirely in vain. Soon after the Damra incident, the District Magistrate found it politic to accede to at least some of the peasant demands. It was decided that after the seed grain had been harvested, the farmer would now get one-third of the produce while the jotedar would retain two-thirds. Also, the peasants were promised hay for thatching. Though these were a far cry from meeting the full demands of the peasant movement, they signalled the beginning of a militant left peasant mobilization in Birbhum which would go from strength to strength with the passing of years. In the late 1950s, the district was witness to a movement against increased canal taxes and compulsory levies. There was the movement in support of the flood-victims. In 1959, the Food Movement spread to Birbhum and there was widespread civil disobedience in various parts of the district. In Suri, Turku Hansda and Deben Roy led a massive movement as a part of the Food Movement and more than a hundred agitators were arrested.

The 1960s, as we know, was an eventful decade, to understate the case. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 led to the indiscriminate arrest and detention without trial of suspected Sinophiles (read Communists). The peasant movement at this stage linked up with the burgeoning students' movement in the district. Students of schools and colleges of Hetampur and Dubarajpur raided and vandalized BDO offices demanding the release of



political prisoners, food and kerosene. Hundreds, again, were arrested and injured. This was also the decade when a restlessness with regard to the methods of the CPI led to the formation of the CPI(M) in 1964 and further the CPI(M-L) in 1969, the latter group being disaffected by the parliamentary politics of the CPI(M). Both found followers in the district and violent clashes ensued, leading to many political murders. By this time, of course, the CPI(M) had already tasted power through the United Front government in 1967 and its *modus operandi* had started showing signs of change at the level of the district leaders. The grassroots peasant leaders, however, seemed to retain their radicalism through the 1960s into the 1970s; and we find that in 1972, the peasant leaders Deben Roy and Shambhu Mukherjee were seriously wounded in a police cane charge while organizing *Shaheed Dibas* at Rampurhat on 31 August.

This is only a sampling of the rich, diverse and complicated skein that is left politics and mobilisation in Birbhum. There is a wealth of documents waiting on left mobilization in Birbhum— at the level of the peasants as well as the students, though the latter became prominent only from the 1960s. This research will endeavour to weave together a narrative on the basis of these documents. At another level, these documents also reveal an overwhelming quantum of SC/ST participation, albeit the upper echelons of leadership were generally monopolized by the upper castes. Leaders such as Turku Hansda are, by all accounts, exceptions. This makes for the obviously interesting study of how the Communist parties managed to maintain its upper-caste character even when it was working with the most disenfranchised groups of the society in Birbhum. Further, woman leaders are rarely mentioned. Arun Chowdhury's formidable list of short biographies of left leaders of Birbhum (almost 50 of them) mentions less than half a dozen women, making the upper-caste character of the parties also predominantly male. In writing a narrative history of left mobilisation in Birbhum, interesting as it will be in itself, these lateral considerations may probably shine a light on how we might understand the character of communist movement in Bengal at large.