

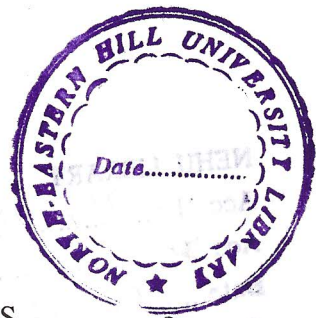
Peasant Movement in North East India

(1946-1950)



Girban Ranjan Biswas

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GIRBAN RANJAN BISWAS



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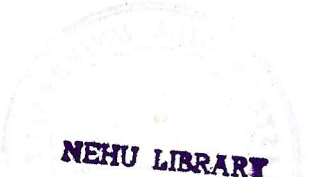
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Foreword

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*Dedicated to
 the Memory of those peasants who
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Foreword

The peasants in Colonial India suffered the cruel extortions of the feudal gentry who enjoyed the protection of the British Raj. Nevertheless, these exploited peasants took up arms to give expression to the grievances of their miseries against the feudo-colonial combine, first, through a series of sporadic upsurges and, then, organised and sustained movements. In the latter phase, the peasant mobilisation merged into the mainstream of the national movement under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party of India. Tebhaga falls in the second category, though it occurred in the years of decolonisation, when the country was on the threshold of independence, and it continued for sometimes after the transfer of power to enforce reforms in the feudo-colonial pattern of landholdings. The movement was essentially a series of organised peasant protests in Bengal and the Bengalee dominated districts of Assam to secure a higher quantum of share to the peasants of the yields of their labour. Tebhaga or the movement for two-thirds of the yields started in the northern districts of Bengal and gradually spread to the eastern districts of the province. Thereafter, the peasants in the Bengalee districts of Assam, namely, Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara were also encouraged by the nationalist leaders to agitate on local issues. In Cachar, the demand for two-thirds took a militant form and some peasants laid their lives for the cause of tebhaga. In this district, the movement continued even after the transfer of power, at least for three more years.

Although the tebhaga movement in Bengal has been studied by some scholars as part of the history of peasant movements in the province, the same movement in Assam and the North East did not receive our adequate attention. Dr. Girban

Ranjan Biswas has done a great service to the academia by drawing our attention to the impact of the Tebhaga Movement in this part of the country and by retrieving the hidden deeds of tebhaga activists in North East India in all its nuances and ramifications. His study is based on original documents which have been preserved in various archives and records branches as well as the additional information gathered through his interactions with the participants of the movement. Equally significant is his focus on the tebhaga in the context of peasant situation in Colonial India and the land-man relations in local conditions. I am confident that this excellent monograph bridges an important gap in our current knowledge of the peasant history of India.

Assam University
December 15, 2001

J.B. BHATTACHARJEE

Acknowledgements

The present work is a revised version of my Doctoral Thesis submitted to the Assam University, Silchar. In this volume I have made an humble attempt to bring to light the nature of peasant protest in this part of North-East India. And for that I have taken oral evidence by way of interview of peasant activists and leaders at the time of the field work. I have been enlightened by them not only about peasant protest but also about various facts of rural life and the behaviour of peasants. I must express indebtedness to all of them but for whose help it would not have become possible to unearth the entire historical facts.

I am grateful to Dr. Sajal Nag for his inspiration and guidance. I also thank Md. Parwez, Lecturer in the Department of History, Assam University who has rendered invaluable service in my work. I am grateful to many of my friends, colleagues and relatives who were constant source of inspiration for me and also helped me in different ways to find out materials to complete my research work.

The Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, is also gratefully acknowledged for its liberal contingency grant to support my visits to Archives and Libraries.

The help of the Librarians of Assam Assembly Library, National Library, Kolkata; Library of the Centre for Studies, Social Science; Kolkata; Bhupesh Gupta Pathagar, Kolkata; Sahitya Academy Library, Kolkata; Library of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Kolkata; Assam State Archive, Guwahati and North Eastern Hill University Library, Shillong and Library of North East Council, Shillong. I am also indebted to Mr. N.K. Singh, Deputy Superintendent of Police Special Branch, Kahilipara, Guwahati; Alope Sankar Dutta,

Additional Suptd. of Police, Cachar and Bidhan Dasgupta, a staff of District Intelligence Branch who showed very keen interest to find out old police records to substantiate the historical facts. My special thanks go to the Departmental Library, History, Assam University, Silchar for providing me access to its excellent collections. I am thankful to my wife Sunanda Biswas who had to tolerate my prolonged absences for field work ungrudgingly. My thanks also goes to the publishers for their help in the production of this book.

Lastly, I express my deepest gratitude to Prof. J.B. Bhattacharjee, the then Vice Chancellor, Assam University, who not only provided active help to my work, but also done me an honour by writing the Foreword to this book.

No research work speaks the last word. I am responsible for all the omissions, if any, and I indulge the cravings of all to excuse me for the lapses which are not done consciously.

GIRBAN R. BISWAS

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Introduction

The weakening of the authority of the centralised Mughal State was compounded by serious economic crisis. It was further precipitated by the tendency of the Mughal *zamindars* and *jagirdars* to acquire massive wealth from land revenue collection through the *ijaradari* system, it resulted in the plunder of the countryside. This loot continued and even perpetrated after the East India Company took over the revenue administration. From Permanent settlement to Ryotwari and Mahalwari settlements, the principal motive behind those settlements was maximisation of revenue. No wonder, the sector which was most affected by the character of colonial rule, was agriculture. Even before the formal take over in 1858, Bengal was reeling under pressure of the colonial state to produce more revenue. It resulted not only in thorough transformation of agricultural sector but also reduced many a peasant to mere cultivators, who vented their anger and impoverishment through a series of resistance movements. In fact, the formative years of the colonial rule in India was ruptured again and again by these frequent and sporadic uprisings of the peasant and tribal cultivators. From 1763 to 1856 there were more than forty rebellions apart from hundreds of minor upsurges. There was hardly a year without one armed opposition or other. Displaced peasants and demobilised soldiers and dispossessed *zamindars* led by monks were one of the first to take up arms against the alien rulers. These uprisings are known as sanyasin rebellion immortalised by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his famous *Anandmath*, lasted from 1763 to 1800 and followed by Chuar uprising of 1766-1772, covering five districts of Bengal and Bihar. It broke out again during 1765-1816. Other major rebellions of Eastern

India are those of Rangpur and Dinajpur (1783), Bishnupur and Birbhum (1799), Orissa Zamindar (1804-1817) and Sambalpur (1822-1840). In South India, the Raja of Vijaynagaram revolted in 1794, the Poligars of Tamilnadu in 1790, the Poligars of Malabar and Coastal Andhra in the first decade of the 19th century. Dewan Velu Thampi of Travancore organised a heroic revolt in 1805. The Mysore peasant revolted in 1830-31. There were major uprisings in Vishakhapatnam in 1830-34, Ganjam in 1835 and Karnool in 1846-47.

Assam also did not lag behind. The reason is not far to seek. It has been rightly remarked, "the land revenue policy in Assam produced the severest strain on the peasant economy in Assam."¹ The British by adhering to their colonial policy made the position of the peasants of Assam such that they had to surrender to the state a large proportion of their agricultural output than peasants in other parts of Eastern India and they suffered all the greater till about the end of the 19th century because of certain development in the economy.² In course of time the patience of the peasants of Assam reached beyond toleration. The result was a popular upsurge which became well-known as the Phulguri Dhawa (battle of Phulguri) of 1861 and this was followed by a series of peasant revolts in Rangia and Patharughat in 1893-94.

In Western India chiefs of Saurashtra revolted in 1816-30, Kolis of Gujarat in 1824-28 and again in 1839 and 1849. In fact, Maharashtra was in perpetual state of revolt after the final defeat of Peshwa. Prominent among them were the Bhil uprising (1818-1831), the Kittur uprising (1824) led by Chinava, the Satava uprising (1844).

Northern India was no less turbulent. The Western UP and Haryana peasants, rose up to arms in 1824, and the Bilaspur peasants in 1805, Talluqdars of Aligarh in 1814-17, the Bundels of Jabalpur in 1842 and of Kandesh in 1852. Among the tribal uprisings of Santhals who rose in 1854-60 was most intensive. The Kols of Chhotanagpur revolted in 1820-27 and the uprising of Birsa Munda took place in 1899-1900. In two decades since the World War of 1914-18, the peasant unrest, "advanced at a speed without previous parallel and raked on a more and more clearly revolutionary character. The world economic

crisis knocked at the bottom out of the already exhausted agrarian economy of India. The resulting process of rack-renting, debt enslavement and expropriation found its reflection in rising movements of the peasants in all parts of India".³

1936 witnessed the organisational efforts to co-ordinated peasant movements. It manifested in the formation of All India Kisan Sabha. The period of 1942-45 was a period of great trial of kisan movement. "The whole period is full of glorious achievements of kisans of India. Thousands and thousands of acres of fallow lands are brought under cultivation in Andhra. The kisans themselves got together, built huge dams and saved big tracts of land from being devastated by flood. In Bengal even during the worst days of famines, the kisans in most of the villages in surplus area got together, pooled their entire stock and sent the village surplus to their starving brothers in different districts".⁴ But as far as the peasant movement is concerned, it was on a low ebb, during this period. The nationalist leaders refused to mobilise the rebellious peasantry who were ready for a violent show down with the colonial state on the aftermath of August 1942. As a result, the moral of the peasants dipped down and the communist led Kisan Sabha also did not organise any militant struggle during the people's war phase. But in the winter of 1946, the peasant struggle erupted like a volcano, millions of tenants and agricultural labourer were mobilised in *tebhaga* and *tanka* struggle in Bengal. Communist cadres including many urban student militants who went out into the countryside to organise *bargadars* who had become a major and growing section of the rural population as poor peasants lost lands through depression and famine and were pushed down to the level of share-croppers. They numbered 60% of villagers in some pockets which became *tebhaga* strongholds at a later date.

In Talengana armed struggle, in the revolt of Warli of Maharashtra, in the second wave of Ba-kasht struggle in Bihar, Dhenkanal movement in Orissa and the militant peasant struggle in UP and Patiala, the situation was so grave that, according to Sumit Sarkar, it created a major pressure from below through the British to quit India.

Historiography

Although India has a rich history of peasant resistance, Indian historians had been until recently shy of recording their role in making of Indian nation. In fact, Indian peasants, to use Ranajit Guha's words, "denied recognition as subject of history in his own rights".⁵ Truly speaking the identity of Indian nation is unthinkable without the contribution of the peasant struggle to it. These struggles formed an integral part of the Indian freedom movement. The colonial state termed these movements as insurgency and rebellions. The colonial historians leveled these movements as backward looking, unprogressive and blind-hitting out of a people enslaved by premordialism or superstitious consciousness while the neo-colonialist viewed the peasant movements as a handiwork of the sub-contractors. Sometimes these revolts were seen as machinations of the rich peasantry to whom the poorer peasants were subordinated by factions or bonds of clientale like share-cropping, money-lending and tenancy. The Naxalite movement in late 60s led to revival of interest in the peasant movement in India. In 1974, Katheline Gough wrote an inspiring article on Indian peasant uprising and showed that India has rich history of peasant struggle, of which Naxalite movement was only a continuation. Gough has recently compiled a list of 77 peasant uprisings involving violence for the entire British period and classified them under five types viz., restorative, religious, social banditry, terrorist vengence and armed insurrection. 1857 might be regarded as the culmination of the older type of anti-British resistance, led by dispossessed chiefs and with restorative aims. Dhanagre studied the peasant movements from Mophla to Telengana in his *Peasant Movement in India*, A.R. Desai edited a volume entitled, *Peasant Struggle in India*, covering a long period and unearthing massive materials. Sunil Sen's *Agrarian Struggles in Bengal* followed by *Peasant Movement in India*, covered the entire 19th and 20th century peasant movements. In 1983, a path-breaking study of the structure of peasant resistance in 19th century India was published by Ranajit Guha (Elementary aspect of peasant insurgency in Colonial India.) Following this, a group of scholars gathered round him to establish

a new historiographical school called, 'Subaltern School'. This school used the Gramscian concept, Subaltern as a blanket term to cover the lower echelons and non-mainstream classes of the society. It tried to attract our attention to unorganised peasant initiative to resist colonial and class oppressions. It showed that there were two domains of politics in Colonial India: Elite and Subaltern. In the elite domains, their scramble for power and privileges were confined to the legal and political limits prescribed by the colonial state. Hence, their mobilisation too was from the above i.e., verticals. In contrast, the subaltern movements were autonomous and based on traditional organisation and kinship or caste organisation depending on the level of consciousness. Thus, its mobilisation is horizontal.

Tebhaga

Of all the peasant movements listed above tebhaga was one of the most important along with INA, RIN mutiny, Punnapra-Vaylar movement in Travancore and Telengana peasant armed revolt in Hyderabad. Tebhaga in Bengal offered the most formidable blow to the foundation of the colonial state and hastened up the British withdrawal from India. Needless to say, its importance could never be undermined. The importance of tebhaga lies in the fact that it was the first politically organised mass peasant movement led by the communist party as well as the kisan sabha. Till tebhaga most of the peasant movements were organised as part of the nationalist struggle. Even those which were not organised as part of the nationalist movement were at least inspired by it. The post Second World War economic crisis had compelled the peasants to mobilise themselves. The Bengal peasantry had been fighting for the largest share. In September 1946, the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha gave a call to implement, through a mass struggle, the Floud Commission's recommendation of tebhaga i.e., two-third share of the crop, instead of half, even less, for the share-cropper on land rented from *Jotedars*. The movement caught on suddenly from harvest time in November with the central slogan *Nij Khamare Dhan Tolo* (share-croppers taking paddy to their threshing floor and not to the *jotedar's* house).

The movement immediately appeared in 19 districts of Bengal. The Statesman, which covered the events, said, "dumbed through the past centuries he is today transformed by a shout of slogan. It is inspiring to see him marching across a field with his fellows each shouldering a *lathi* like rifle with a red flag at the head of the procession".⁶ In certain pockets of Midnapur the *tebhaga* activists declared themselves independent thereby sending danger signal to the colonial state. Even though the movement did not take any violent turn, the intensity of the movement compelled the frightened *Jotedars* to leave the area. Understandably, the movement was against the *Jotedars* and not the colonial state, it was intense enough for the British to panic. Even the Indian National Congress in Faizpur session in 1937 demanded for a 50% reduction in land revenue and rent, a moratorium on debts, the abolition of feudal levies, security of tenure for tenants, a living wage for agricultural labourer and the recognition of peasant union. But when the question for any militant peasant movement came up, the National Congress always maintained a dubious attitude as far as the peasant movement for establishment of their rightful place in the society was concerned and was alarmed by the power of the *tebhaga* movement.

Like most successful movements in Indian history, *tebhaga* also had a spread which even its organisers failed to record. The course of *tebhaga* which is known to have erupted in North Bengal and then spread to certain parts of Eastern Bengal has not been properly recorded by the chroniclers of the movement. What was not known till recently is that *tebhaga* also had erupted with equal intensity and perhaps for longer period than Bengal in certain parts of North East India like Goalpara and Cachar. Surprisingly, that the *tebhaga* had taken place in this part of India has not only escaped attention of historians but even the organisers of the movement—the Communist party of India. Along with the *tebhaga* movement, *Tanka* movement of the Hajong tribe of North Maymensingh took a militant turn in the Maymensingh district. The *Tanka* movement was more militant than *tebhaga* but confined in a small pocket. This movement which had grass root support and organisation could not withstand the repression of the state as

it was limited to insignificant ethnic minority community's movement. Like *tebhaga*, this movement also did not receive the attention of the historians. The lack of authoritative and objective work on the movement especially in English is a great hindrance to its proper evaluation.

As already mentioned, *tebhaga* was considered as a Bengal phenomenon only. However, a closure search by the researchers has revealed that it was not actually so. The communist activities had already started in the Surma Valley (Sylhet and Cachar) in 1930s. The kisan sabha had been established in 1937. As a part of the Surma Valley, Cachar had become an important centre for Kisan Sabha activists. Prominent kisan sabha leaders in the region were Irabat Singh, Dwijen Sengupta, Sitaram Baroi, Bhagirath Singh, Jiban Banerjee, Motilal Jagirdar, Mrinal Dasgupta, Achinta Bhattacharjee, Manindra Burman, Moni Roy, Gopen Roy and others.

Inspired by the theory of *tebhaga* and its immense success in Bengal, these activists mobilised the peasants of Cachar. The movement caught the fancy of the peasants and *bhagchasi* and immediately took a militant turn resulting in the death of some peasant in the police firing.

In this work our effort is to reconstruct the story of *tebhaga* that took place in Cachar and then integrate it with the *tebhaga* movement in Bengal. We shall also try to study the land tenure system of Cachar to provide the backdrop of the eruption. Secondly, we will study the *tebhaga* movement in Bengal to provide the context. Thirdly, the work shall trace the emergence of the concept of *tebhaga* and its penetration to the Surma Valley districts. Fourthly, it will study the organisation of Kisan Sabha in Cachar and its appropriation of the concept of *tebhaga* in mobilising the peasants and *bhagchasi* of the region. Lastly, on the basis of the contemporary accounts, it will structure the actual events that took place under the banner of *tebhaga* movement.

Cachar (Kachar) is situated in south Assam and is confined by the mountaneous ranges from three sides. The landscape of the district is full of ranges, river system, plains, lakes and marshes. The Nile of Cachar—the river Barak flowing east to west virtually bisects the districts.

It is the Barak and its tributaries which have created a large area of alluvial plain suitable for cultivation. Perhaps this attracted the people of diverse races to adopt this valley for settlement. Fisher observed that the soil of Cachar is mixture of land and silicean particles and could produce large variety of produce.⁷ "There can be no doubt of the great prosperity of the inhabitants of Cachar. The country is extremely fertile, and yields heavy crops with hardly any cultivation."⁸ In rainy season, most of the plain area get inundated resulting in marshes and lakes. But the annual inundation seems to be a boon for the fertility of the soil. The main crops are rice, wheat, pulse, potato and sugarcane.⁹ The cultivators get at least two crops annually in most of the areas. The fertility of the soil is further referred to by R.B. Pemberton and J.C. Burns who were associated with Cachar district.

In the beginning of the 19th century a large part of the district, particularly the area north of the Barak was under forest cover. A charmed visitor observed, "the rich vegetation, beautiful forms of hills, the fertility of the cultivated lands, the size and beauty of the bamboo groves, fruit trees that surround the cottage of the people and even the wild and primeval appearance of the great marshes, give a richness and picturesque variety to the scenery of Cachar, is a rare instance which is generally wanting in the monotonous plains of Eastern Bengal".¹⁰

Cachar has a little similarity with Assam proper in respect of language, culture and tradition other than being an administrative unit. This distinction has long been noticed. R.B. Pemberton while writing a report on the Eastern Frontier of British India observed that "from Sylhet to Jirighat the border of Manipur, the geographical feature, the appearance of the people, language, culture and tradition are alike."¹¹ Obviously, Pemberton did not find any similarity with the other parts of Assam. Grierson's survey found the Bengali language of Barak-Surma Valley as part of the Eastern Bengal dialect. Even geographically, the Barak Valley is an extension and continuation of the Bengal plain. Earlier it was put under Assam for administrative convenience and later the partition of India did not live any scope for re-organisation of the state. Prior to the establishment of British rule, Cachar was ruled by

an independent dynasty belonging to the Dimasa tribals. Gobinda Chandra, the last Raja was assisted by the British power in repulsing the Burmese invasion and was on friendly terms. He was assassinated in 1830. In the absence of any successor, Cachar was annexed to the British territory. However, western part i.e., Karimganj which was earlier under the Mughal authority, was already under British control even before the establishment of British rule in Cachar. Sylhet and Cachar were districts in Dacca division of Bengal till the region was transferred to the newly created Chief Commissionership of Assam in 1874.

Objective and Hypothesis

The basic objective of the study is to integrate the development in North East India with those of the rest of India to enable the reconstruction of a truly national history of India. In doing so, the local backdrop, roots, development and socio-economic consequences of tebhaga in North East India will be studied in comparison with North Bengal where the tebhaga was the strongest. The working hypothesis is that, notwithstanding local variations, the tebhaga movement had encompassed some districts of pre-colonial North Eastern region to throw up a strong peasant resistance to some of the remnant feudal economic institutions, concurrently with the freedom struggle. The emphasis will be on the study of the role of middle class leadership from outside, the emergence of a peasant leadership from within the aggrieved peasants themselves and the role of communist ideology and organisation in the movement. It will also be seen how far it was able to exert simultaneous pressure on the colonial state.

Survey of Literature

Militant peasant movement which took place in different parts of India have by now received attention of the historians. Though only next to North Bengal, the main centre of the tebhaga peasant movement was in the different region of the district of Cachar. As the area is situated in geographically isolated pockets in north eastern parts of India, the

movement did not catch the attention of the national historians. The tebhaga peasant movement in Surma Valley was no less intensive and militant than North Bengal, but the martyrdom of seven peasant activists found no place in the history of all India peasant movement. No systematic description or analysis of the peasant movement in this part of the erstwhile Surma Valley has been conducted. It is, therefore, necessary to bring out the features of the glorious history of the peasant movement that took place in Cachar.

The narration of the experience of some peasant activists and the communist leaders are the only authentic source materials to highlight the tebhaga peasant movement in this region. Mrinal Dasgupta's *Je Path Diye Elem*, Chanchal Sharma's book, *Surma Upathakay Krishak O Sramik Andoloner Itihas*, and Srihatte Biplobbad *O Communist Andolon*, *Smritikatha*, are very important literature on peasant movement and tebhaga *andolan* in particular. *Nankar Bidroho* by Ajoy Bhattacharjee is a narration of the direct experience of the peasant movement of a peasant leader. This researcher's first attempt on the subject is a paper on 'Land Reform and Peasant Movement' published by North East India Council for Social Science Research in 1986. Some published works are available from Bangladesh e.g., *Peasant Utopia* by Taj-Ul-Islam Hasmi. Some experience of the peasant movement with reference to tebhaga movement in Cachar and Goalpara has been recently published in *Subarnajayanti Prakashmala* in 1986 where three famous leaders of the then Assam, Late Bires Chandra Mishra, Late Achinta Bhattacharjee and Pranesh Biswas has written articles. These are: '*Surma Upathyakay Krishaker Larai*', '*Assam Krishak Sabha Gorar Bacharguli*' and '*Krishaker Larai O Assame Krishak Sabha Gathaner Itihas*'.

Data and Methodology

The major sources of the study are:

A. Archival Sources

- 1) Settlement reports from the District Settlement Office, Cachar which gives detailed informations about land settlement in Cachar.

- 2) Assam State Gazette preserved in the district record office, Cachar, Silchar.
- 3) Police records of the relevant period from the office of the Superintendent of Police, Cachar, Silchar.
- 4) Assembly debate from the Assam State Assembly Library, Dispur, Guwahati.
- 5) Reports of the Secretary, Governor of Assam from Assam State Archives.
- 6) Police records from Special Branch Headquarter, Assam Police, Kahilipara, Dispur, Guwahati.
- 7) Newspaper reports on the period concerned from National Library Annex, Calcutta.
- 8) Documents and newspaper of Communist Party of India (Marxist) from CPI(M) Headquarters, Alimuddin Street Calcutta.
- 9) Relevant materials from:
 - i) Bhupesh Gupta Library, Entally, Calcutta.
 - ii) Library of the Centre for Studies Social Science, Calcutta.
 - iii) Library of Sahitya Academy, Calcutta.
- 10) Census Report from the NEHU Library, Shillong.

B. Oral Sources

Important personalities connected with the movement and the peasant activists have been extensively interviewed. Prominent among them are:

- i) Dwijen Sengupta.
- ii) Late Motilal Jagirdar.
- iii) Surviving wife of Motilal Jagirdar, Mrs. Manashi Jagirdar.
- iv) Moni Roy.
- v) Bhagirath Singh.
- vi) Sona Singh.
- vii) Chandreswar Singh.
- viii) Anurupa Biswas.
- ix) Late Mrinal Kanti Dasgupta & others.

C. Memoirs and Reports from the Participants

- i) Chanchal Kumar Sharma, *Surma Upathyakay Krishak O Sramik Andoloner Itihas*, *Srihatte Biplobbad O Communist Andolan-Smritikatha*.

- ii) Mrinal Kanti Dasgupta, *Je Path Diye Elam*.
- iii) Ajoy Bhattacharjee, *Nankar Bidroho*.
- iv) Subarna Jayanti Prakashmala of Krisak Sabha 1936–1986. Articles of Achinta Bhattacharjee, Pranesh Biswas and Biresh Chandra Mishra.

In addition to these, some secondary source will be used. As far as methodology is concerned, the study will adopt empirical method.

Organisation

The study is divided into nine chapters, beginning with an introduction which traces the history and role of peasant movement in India and the importance of tebhaga movement in Cachar. We have tried to bring to light in this chapter that the tebhaga movement which was the brain child of the Communist Party of India and the Kisan Sabha failed to record the first politically organised movement in Cachar in their history. It is our endeavour to add one more leaf to the history of peasant movement by establishing the fact that Tebhaga movement did take place in Cachar.

The second chapter traces the evolution of land tenure and revenue system in the pre-colonial period. The pre-colonial period is attributed to the rule of Dimasa tribal Kings. During their rule, practically speaking, no proper land tenure system evolved. The entire Cachar plains were covered by forest and swamps. There were not much space for human settlement but there was no dearth of land for cultivation and settlement. The adjoining district of Sylhet was thickly populated. The vast tract of uninhabited land of Cachar allured them to extend their cultivation. The development of settlement in a new found territory in the Cachar plains has a history of its own. The early settlers were all peasants. They organised themselves into groups and then proceeded beyond the settled areas to occupy a fallow tract of the size that would be enough for the subsistence of the group. The area was known as *khel*. It was indeed an agricultural guild and collectively managed by the inhabitants. Each village was considered as a self-sufficient autonomous unit. The king did

not interfere with the functioning of the *khel*. Every *khel* had a *mukhtar* elected by the villagers. At a later date the *mukhtar* became the agent of the king.

When the British annexed Cachar, they allowed the existing system to continue, but when the question of revenue arose, the British government surveyed the land and framed rules of settlement from time to time. These were the five years settlement rules of 1838–39, settlement for 15 years in 1843–44, Capt. Stewart's settlement for 20 years etc. In order to induce further settlement the British also offered favourable terms for reclamation of jungle lands called *janglebari* lease of 1866, 1875 and 1882.

The most comprehensive settlement operation was carried out by W.L. Scot in 1917–18. Scot's settlement expired in 1938 but due to the difficult situation created by the war, the term was thence extended upto 31st March, 1948. The last settlement of the district was done by R. Sharma. This settlement was the first major settlement in the state carried out under the provisions of the Assam Land Revenue Reassessment Act 1936, the enactment of which marked an important event in the history of development of the system of revenue assessment in Assam.

As already mentioned, the Dimasa king allowed the *khel* system to operate independently but the heads of *khels* were subjected to the authority of the royal officers. The *mukhtar* became an important official of the state. He was the collector of the revenue and the civil and criminal judges. The British liquidated the *khel* system and the land was privatised. They declared the actual occupant of land as the owner, granted them *patta* and declared them *mirasdar*, as they paid rent directly to the government.

From the above facts we have analysed how the feudal element was imposed in the rural economy and how the different settlement rules gave rise to different classes of peasants in the Ryotwari settlement, including sub-tenancy and *Bhagchasi*. It will also be studied how the seeds of future struggle by the peasant was sown by British.

In Bengal after a prolong debate in the British government, permanent settlement of zamindari system was introduced there. But the system became so all pervasive that it ruined the

entire self sufficient economy of Bengal. The net result was so disastrous that even the farmers of this system had to repent. It was the cause of famine in Bengal, it was the cause of giving birth to different classes of peasants and neo-zamindars. Consequently, demands were raised from all quarters for the abolition of zamindari system. This resulted in the appointment of a Commission in 1938 with Sir Francis Floud as Chairman and some experts in revenue matters and economists, leading lawyers and representatives of landlords and tenants as members to examine the existing land system in Bengal in its various aspects and to advise what modifications, if any, should be made and to what manner and what stages they should be affected.

The chapter three discusses the above report of the Commission. This commission may be regarded as the initiator of the tebhaga movement. It recommended two-third share of the produce which subsequently became the battle cry of the tebhaga movement. In this we tried to show how the recommendations of the Floud Commission conferred legitimacy to the movement of the *adhiars* of Bengal who had already demanded two-third share in their local agitation. We have also shown how the Floud Commission left a deep impact in the mind of the people of Assam.

The fourth chapter details the outbreak of tebhaga movement in North Bengal after the recommendations of the Floud Commission. The Commission submitted its report in 1940 and in the same year the Bengal Kisan Sabha in its Panjia Conference for the first time raised the demand for two-third share of produce for the *Bargadars*. Although the movement took place little later, it has been seen how the Bengal peasant revolted against the century old oppression and shook the foundation of the colonial state. It also brings out to what extent the tebhaga movement hastened the British withdrawal from India.

The fifth chapter studies the emergence of Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party in Cachar. The Kisan Sabha gave leadership to many peasant movements in Cachar and in 1946, along with Bengal, the oppressed *Bhagchasi* stood up unitedly to demand their legitimate two-third share of the produce. The movement continued throughout the entire harvesting season

of 1946 but the government was not in a mood to accept their demand. The movement in 1946 was conducted in a peaceful manner and achieved partial success.

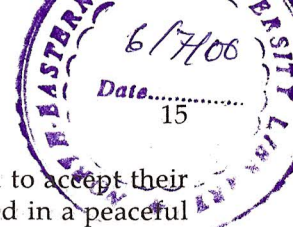
The sixth chapter deals with the peasant movement in general in the districts of Sylhet and Goalpara and tebhaga movement in particular. In the north eastern states, both the districts were always a part of province of Bengal and the land tenure system was permanent settlement. In those areas the landlords enjoyed extensive power and position, but the condition of the peasant deteriorated. Goalpara produced a leader like Maulana Bhasani who organised the muslim peasants in 1930s and later the Communist party and Kisan Sabha continued his unfinished task. Sylhet district was already engrossed in *nankar* agitation and national freedom struggle along with these movements, the peasants of Bhanubil, Bhatipara and Bangshikunda fought against the landlords oppression. When Bengal peasants organised the tebhaga movement, according to record, only one incident of tebhaga movement took place in Sylhet.

The seventh chapter discusses the second phase of the tebhaga agitation. The peasant realised that, short of total fulfilment of their demand, they were not going to stop. They carried out the propaganda relentlessly with aggressive design and finally in 1949 tebhaga again broke out taking a violent turn. The 1949 movement was confined to Borkhola where five peasant activists were killed by police firing and two Manipuri women received bullet injury, one of whom died in the police custody.

The eighth chapter analyses the strategy, pattern and technique of the movement. It also studies the basic feature of the movement in Cachar as contrasted to the North Bengal movement. It also studies the causes of taking violent turn of the movement along with the composition of the peasantry and its leaders. The chapter in question also tries to highlight the class character of the peasant as well as the middle class leadership.

The last chapter is the conclusion which summarises the spread of tebhaga movement from Bengal to Cachar. It refutes the contention that tebhaga remained confined to North Bengal and Kakdwip only. It shows that without the

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knowledge of the organisers of the movement in Bengal and even the chroniclers of tebhaga, the movement had erupted in distant Barak Valley not once but twice and in some pockets of Goalpara, thereby completing the All India pattern of peasant movement in India.

ENDNOTES

1. B. Choudhury, 'Eastern India', in: *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol. II*, p. 90.
2. *Op. cit.*
3. Rajni Palme Dutt, *India Today*, p. 276.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
5. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspect of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, p. 4.
6. Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movement in India*, p. 107.
7. J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar Under British Rule in North East India*, p. 184.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
10. W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, p. 363.
11. R.B. Pemberton, *A Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, p. 206.

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