

Women's Participation in the Tebhaga Movement in West Bengal (1946–1947): A Socio-Historical Study

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Abstract: *The Tebhaga Movement (1946–1947) occupies a significant place in the agrarian history of colonial Bengal as one of the largest peasant movements against the exploitative sharecropping system. Led primarily by the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha and supported by the Communist Party of India, the movement demanded that sharecroppers (bargadars) retain two-thirds (tebhaga) of the harvested crop instead of surrendering half to the landlords (jotedars). While scholars have paid considerable attention to the movement's economic and political dimensions, mainstream historiography has often underrepresented women's role. This study explores the socio-historical dimensions of women's participation in the Tebhaga Movement in West Bengal during 1946–1947. It examines the social background of rural women, the nature of their involvement, their leadership, and the transformative impact of the movement on gender relations in rural Bengal. Based on historical documents, archival materials, memoirs, and secondary literature, the study argues that women's participation was not merely supportive but constituted an essential component of the movement's success. Their involvement challenged patriarchal norms and contributed significantly to the development of women's political consciousness in modern Bengal.*

Keywords: Tebhaga Movement, Women, Sharecroppers, Bengal, Agrarian Movement, Gender, Peasant Politics, Socio-History

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of peasant movements in India reflects the continuous struggle of rural communities against economic exploitation, social injustice, and political oppression. Among these struggles, the Tebhaga Movement of 1946–1947 emerged as one of the most influential agrarian movements in Bengal. The movement was primarily organized to improve the conditions of sharecroppers, who cultivated land owned by landlords but received only half of the produce despite providing labour, seeds, and cultivation expenses.

Although the movement is generally interpreted as a class struggle, it also represented an important phase in the history of women's participation in political movements. Rural women crossed traditional domestic boundaries to join demonstrations, protect harvested crops, resist police repression, and organize village committees. Their participation transformed the movement into a mass social struggle rather than merely an economic protest.

This study investigates women's participation in the Tebhaga Movement from a socio-historical perspective by examining their roles, motivations, challenges, and contributions to rural political mobilization.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

The agrarian economy of Bengal during the late colonial period was characterized by unequal land distribution and exploitative tenancy arrangements. Under the sharecropping system, known locally as **adhi** or **barga**, peasants cultivated land owned by jotedars and were compelled to surrender half of the harvested crop.



The recommendations of the Floud Commission (1940) suggested that sharecroppers should retain two-thirds of the produce because they supplied most cultivation inputs. However, landlords resisted these recommendations. Against this backdrop, the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha launched the Tebhaga Movement in September 1946. The movement rapidly spread across districts such as Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Medinipur, 24 Parganas, and Khulna. The bargadars took the entire crop to their khamar, and demanded tebhaga. In Jalpaiguri the movement was confined to four police stations: Debiganj, Boda, Kotwali and Pachagarh; later it spread to Mal and Meteli. In Debi ganj an old Rajbansi widow, affectionately called "old mother", took out a procession of women as the men vacillated to cut the paddy. Then the men came to the field and joined the women in cutting the paddy. The movement was intense in Pachagarh where Charu Majumdar was a local-leader. In south 24-Parganas the movement was spontaneous in Kakdwip and Mathurapur in the Sundar-bans, where the landowners "took little interest in their tenants." Here petty landlords, discovering that discretion was the better part of valour, generally yielded to the demand of the bargadars, while big landowners seemed to be determined to crush the movement which received an impetus from the publication of the Bargadars Bill. In San-deshkhali in Basirhat subdivision the movement started in early February 1947, which was "wholly organized by out-side agitators"; in some cases the landowners seemed to be wise and did not press for the return of the seed paddy in order to "stave off a worse fate," while in other cases the bargadars came with "agitators 2000 to 3000 strong and carried off almost the entire produce. The movement soon evolved beyond economic demands and became a wider struggle against feudal exploitation, colonial authority, and social inequality.

III. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF RURAL WOMEN

Before the Tebhaga Movement, rural Bengali women experienced multiple forms of marginalization. They generally:

- Had limited property rights.
- Possessed little formal education.
- Were economically dependent upon male family members.
- Performed extensive agricultural labour without recognition.
- Had minimal participation in public decision-making.

Women from the Mahato Colkamar and Santal caste/tribal groups worked in the field both as agricultural labourers and household farm workers. Few Rajbansi and Polia women worked on their own fields. The Mali women worked as maidservants. Extra-mural activities were taboo for other women of the village. The working women were from among the class of small cultivators, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers.

Female agricultural labourers emerged as a distinctive agrarian category as the economic condition of the sharecroppers, poor peasants and agricultural labour households deteriorated. More women were forced to take up daily work on the farms for subsistence. They were low paid, subjected to sex-based wage discrimination and were made to work without specified time schedule. They had been taking advance loan under the Dadan system and were thus caught in a beck-and-call relationship with the landowners. Under the Dadan system a woman took advance loan from the landowner in kind in the lean period of the agricultural cycle on condition that she would be obliged to work for him in the peak season at the stipulated wage of the lean season.

The arbitrary power of the zamindars, moneylenders and jotedars not only took away the crops of poor peasants but also took away their wives. They sexually exploited them and subjected them to severe abuse. If rent remained unpaid or if a peasant died before paying the rent his wife and children were brought to the estate office (kachari) where they were subjected to unspeakable physical torture. The zamindar his sons and other influential people of the village did not hesitate to abuse village women. There was little or no justice against such oppression and wrongdoing.

The moneylenders jotedars and zamindars even controlled the marriages of peasant tenants. On the wedding night they claimed the right to have sexual relations with a tenant's bride. Later they created different opportunities to continue exploiting the peasant's wife. Because of poverty and hardship peasant parents were often forced to sell their daughters.



During times of distress if a peasant could not repay a loan taken from a moneylender he was forced to hand over his daughter to the moneylender.

Economic hardship during the 1940s, especially following the Bengal Famine of 1943, intensified rural poverty and food insecurity. Women bore the greatest burden of these crises, making them particularly receptive to agrarian mobilization.

IV. THE NATURE AND FORMS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

The participation of peasant women in the Tebhaga movement varied across different stages. Their forms of participation and political consciousness evolved step-by-step from the initial to the final stage.

4.1 Participation in Propaganda and Campaigning for Tebhaga

A large number of peasant women participated in the All India Peasant Conference held in Netrakona, Mymensingh in 1945. The presence of thousands of tribal women was particularly astonishing. In 1944, during the preparation for the Setabganj Conference, local peasant women marched to the Kisan Sabha office demanding membership. Following this, urban women activists and peasant worker Bhuteshwari organized door-to-door campaigns to enroll women as members of both the Peasant and Women's Associations. Women organised meetings, mobilised neighbouring villages, disseminated political messages, and encouraged hesitant peasants to join the movement. They became effective grassroots organisers because of their strong community networks.

4.2 Standing in Support of Attacked and Oppressed Male Peasants

When several male peasants were arrested and brought to court, thousands of peasant women led a procession to the town. They surrounded the bungalow of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate to demand the bail of the arrested peasants. In the early stages of the movement in Dinajpur and Rangpur, women protected male peasants from the armed thugs (lathials) of landlords (zamindars and jotedars). In Jalpaiguri, when peasant leader Madhab Datta was severely injured by these thugs, peasant women ignored all threats to arrange for his medical treatment.

4.3 Providing Warning Signals and Monitoring Enemy Movements

Peasant women alerted activists about imminent police attacks. In Sundardighi (Jalpaiguri), under the guidance of Punyeshwari Barman (Burima), village women secretly passed information during meetings to help comrades escape. When police entered villages in Dinajpur, peasant women blew conch shells, beat brass gongs, and chanted "Inquilab Zindabad" to sound an alarm. Women then blocked paths with sticks, brooms, and husking levers (gains).

In Ranisankail, under the leadership of Comrade Bhaguni, the women confiscated a rifle from a policeman who insulted them, and guarded him all night. In Kakdwip, Sandeshkhali, Canning, and nearby areas, leader Hemant Ghoshal was saved from arrest by a peasant mother who hid him in her daughter's bed. Ghoshal later noted that every adult woman enrolled to defend her own village. On September 9, 1949, in Hatla village (Howrah), landlords tried to harvest crop under police protection. Women blew conch shells to signal the village and resisted the police, resulting in a brutal police firing that killed eight peasant women, including two young girls.

Police frequently attempted to suppress the movement through arrests and violence. Women formed protective groups that surrounded police parties, created human barricades, warned villages of approaching police, hid movement leaders, and assisted injured protesters. These actions significantly reduced the effectiveness of colonial repression.

4.4 Direct Participation in Harvesting Crops (Dhankaata)

Led by an elderly Rajbanshi woman known as "Buro Ma," women in Debiganj decided to stand in the front row during harvesting to face landlord attacks on December 15, 1946. On January 3, 1947 (20 Poush 1353 BS) in Atwari (Dinajpur), men harvested the crops while women guarded the fields with bills, axes, sickles, and brooms. Led by Rohini Barman and Jaymoni Barman, the women attacked the armed police with husking levers and broke 5 to 6 rifles,



forcing them to retreat. Women physically participated in harvesting crops and transporting harvested paddy directly to the sharecroppers' granaries rather than to landlords' storage facilities. Their presence prevented landlords from forcibly confiscating harvested grain.

On December 15, 1948, in Budhakhali (Kakdwip), 18 armed police and Congress Seva Dal workers attacked peasants harvesting their fields. A 19-year-old pregnant peasant woman named Pakhi shielded a badly beaten boy with her body. The attackers struck her belly with a rifle butt, causing a miscarriage. Despite being ill, Pakhi returned to the fields on December 30 to claim her share of the harvest. Following this, on December 31, police unleashed terror in Budhakhali, killing three peasant activists.

4.5 Active Resistance and Blocking State Intervention

Peasant leader Moni Singh recorded the bravery of women like Jaymoni of Ranisankail and Dipeshwari, whose groups repeatedly forced the police to retreat. In Guakhol village (Jessore), Saralabala Pal organized a "Broom Force" (Jhata Bahini) of 250 to 300 women who forced the police to apologize and retreat twice. A similar militant women's volunteer group named "Gain Bahini" was formed in Rangpur to drive away landlords and police who raided sharecroppers' houses.

In Debiganj (Jalpaiguri), an elderly leader named "Burima" led a women's force, blocked the police, and challenged them to shoot her instead of arresting anyone. In Pachagarh and Sadar areas, leader Shikha Pal led village women armed with brooms, husking levers, and chili powder to force the police to retreat. In Nandigram (Midnapore), communist leader Bimala Maji organized peasant women who threw chili-salt powder into the eyes of the police and thugs to stop them from seizing harvested crops. A similar resistance was carried out by the Borgo-Kshatriya women in Panskura.

4.6 Armed Struggle and Self-Sacrifice Against State and Feudal Terror

In Baheratali village (Mymensingh), Hajong leader Rasamani scolded hesitant men, rallied her women comrades, and successfully rescued two young women from soldiers at the cost of her own life. On February 20, 1947 (7 Falgun 1353 BS) in Khapur (Dinajpur), thousands of peasants blocked a police force trying to arrest underground leaders. Jasodaraoni Sarkar led the women's volunteer force, and when the police opened fire, she became the first martyr. A total of 121 rounds were fired, killing 14 peasants on the spot and 8 more died later.

On March 1, 1947, Swarnamayi Oraoni died during a police firing in Mathachulkai (Jalpaiguri). On April 4, 1947, a tea garden laborer named Budhni Oraoni was killed at Meteli. Young tribal and tea-laborer women like Poko Oraoni and Chundia Oraoni played leading militant roles, throwing stones at police and using distractions to help leaders escape.

In the post-independence period, the movement turned into an armed class struggle in the Sundarbans. On November 6, 1948, in Chandanpiri (Kakdwip), hundreds of women resisted a police attack. The police shot and killed Ashwini Das, Uttami Dasi, Batasi, Sarojini, and a pregnant young woman named Ahalya Dasi whose body was brutally mutilated. On February 19, 1949, during a sudden police raid in Dubirbheri (Hooghly), peasant women stood on an embankment to confront the police. The police opened fire, killing 7 women, including five young women known as the "Panchakanya of Dubirbheri." In Howrah, 8 peasants were killed in Masila on February 27, 1949, and another 8 peasant women sacrificed their lives on September 9, 1949.

V. WOMEN LEADERS OF THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

During the Tebhaga movement, along with numerous anonymous rural women, several exceptional women leaders played pioneering roles. Their names, respective contributions, and roles are detailed below:

5.1 Ila Mitra

Ila Mitra, the "Rani of Nachole," organized peasants and indigenous Santhals in Rajshahi's Chapai Nawabganj. She provided political education to rural women, inspiring them to resist landlord oppression. On January 5, 1950, she organized a historic peasant-Santhal uprising in Nachole Upazila. However, the police thwarted the uprising, and Mitra



was arrested while trying to escape. She was detained at Nachole police station for four days, where policemen repeatedly gang-raped and tortured her. Later sent to Rajshahi Central Jail, she faced further torture for refusing to admit involvement. Following a treason trial, Mitra was sentenced to life imprisonment, becoming an iconic symbol of resistance.

5.2 Rani Mitra Dasgupta and Leaders of Mohilla Atmaraksha Samity

Rani Mitra Dasgupta organized rural women through Kisan Sabha, promoting their political participation in agrarian struggles. Alongside her, activists like Swarajdini Sarkar mobilized women under the Mohilla Atmaraksha Samity (M.A.S.) in Dinajpur. Operating as the C.P.I. mass women's front, M.A.S. engaged middle-class, student, and peasant women. In rural areas, it shifted from famine relief to educational and self-supporting work. Leaders argued that independent incomes would improve women's social position in villages. Though women like Kamini Bala Barmani faced social opposition and attended meetings secretly, these leaders successfully expanded women's political arena.

5.3 Jashoda Barmani and Martyred Women

During a violent confrontation at Khanpur, Jashoda Barmani (Rani Sarkar) heroically resisted the arrest of local sharecroppers. When police detained peasants at the landowner's Cutcherry, she pleaded for their release and attacked the police van with an axe. Standing at the forefront, she declared women would die rather than allow their people to be taken. Though six months pregnant, she bravely defied forces until the police vehicle ran over her, killing her instantly. The police fired 119 rounds, killing 17 sharecroppers, including Jashoda Barmani and Kaushalya Kamani. In similar clashes at Thumnia, Sunima Singh and Foko Barmani were killed.

5.4 Sarala Bala Pal and Local Resistance Leaders

In Hatiar near Bakdi in Jessore, Sarala Bala Pal led a determined group of village women against the police. To prevent forces from taking arrested peasants, her group dragged a police boat ashore. They successfully detained the police until word came from peasant leaders to release them. Similarly, a Purushottampur widow emerged as a notable local leader, spearheading every kisan action armed simply with a broomstick. These women, many being widows, faced fewer family constraints, allowing them to reject traditional societal seclusion. They challenged landlord structures and led spontaneous, militant actions to protect their community.

5.5 Burima and Front-line Organizers

During the intense agrarian struggle in Bogra, an elderly woman named Burima (Palanu Barman's mother) led a courageous women's attack against police forces. In another direct confrontation at Neora Majhiali camp in Jalpaiguri, a brave woman named Poko tied an armed policeman to a tree and humiliated him. These prominent individuals, alongside Pratima Rai of Malda, Fuleswari of Birganj, Rani Basanta of Rampur, and Rohini Barmani of Ranisankail, regularly led targeted attacks against jotedars and police parties. They fought valiantly to rescue fellow peasants, sometimes successfully snatching rifles or detaining police forces for up to twenty-four hours.

5.6 The Role of Other Rural and Poor Peasant Women

The wider participation of poor peasant, Scheduled Caste, tribal, Rajbansi, and Polia women focused entirely on active resistance. While men attended secret night meetings, women provided shelter, cooked food, and carried messages between organizers. During the day, they stayed in villages, sounding alarms with drums, tin jars, gongs, and conch shells to warn of police arrivals. Organized into Nari Bahinis, women like Bimala Mandal of Midnapore led demonstrations demanding the release of arrested peasants. They armed themselves with boti, broomsticks, and chilli powder to gherao police and harvest crops defiantly. They also raised discrimination issues in peasant courts.



VI. GENDER TRANSFORMATION DURING THE MOVEMENT

The Tebhaga Movement served as a powerful catalyst for redefining traditional gender roles in rural Bengal. It was not just an economic struggle for crop shares, but a transformative journey where marginalized women evolved from confined domestic individuals into a formidable, unified political force. This transformation progressed through interconnected stages of awakening, articulation, resistance, and systemic change:

6.1 The Awakening through Political Mobilization:

The journey began when peasant and rural women stepped across the threshold of domestic isolation into the political sphere. By regularly attending secret night meetings and mass public gatherings organized by the Kisan Sabha, they absorbed political strategies and defied deep-seated social censures. Leaving their daily chores behind, their presence at these meetings laid the foundational consciousness required for active struggle.

6.2 From Listening to Articulating Grievances

This growing political awareness naturally gave women the confidence to break their silence. Moving beyond passive spectatorship, they began to raise their voices loudly against systemic oppression. Inside the newly established peasant courts of the Tebhaga elaka, they boldly articulated their own demands—extending the narrative of liberation from the shared field to the home by openly addressing domestic abuse, harassment, and wife-beating.

6.3 From Articulation to Frontline Confrontation:

Having found their public voice, women moved from local articulation to direct external resistance, challenging entrenched power dynamics face-to-face. They bravely took charge of the movement's defense by leading major demonstrations, confronting armed police parties, and confidently negotiating with government officials. Their strategic demands for the immediate release of arrested male peasants ensured that cultivation could continue, positioning women as vital protectors of the agrarian economy.

6.4 Institutionalizing Resistance through Collective Leadership

This frontline bravery soon matured into structured, autonomous organization. Peasant women transformed completely from passive recipients of charity into active political agents who exercised collective decision-making. They institutionalized their power by forming local resistance committees and organizing specialized village defense corps like the Nari Bahinis. Through these frameworks, they applied organized community pressure, even implementing social boycotts against abusive or recalcitrant husbands.

6.5 The Ultimate Confluence of Subaltern Solidarity

The culmination of this organized resistance was the dissolution of rigid social hierarchies that had divided rural society for centuries. Driven by the shared intensity of agrarian exploitation, Scheduled Caste, tribal, Rajbansi, and Polia women united seamlessly to protect the harvested crops. This unbreakable communal bond shattered entrenched structures of gender, caste, and landlord oppression simultaneously, rewriting the social fabric of rural Bengal. The Tebhaga Movement conclusively demonstrated that subaltern women were fully capable of political leadership, strategic negotiation, and collective warfare. Their relentless involvement fundamentally altered community perceptions, permanently shifting the image of rural women from victims of history to its active architects.

VII. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN

Women's participation in the Tebhaga Movement was accompanied by considerable risks. These obstacles included:

7.1 Patriarchal Restrictions:

Conservative social norms heavily discouraged rural women from joining public protests, as cross-community activism directly challenged traditional domestic boundaries. Prominent landowners, zamindars, and their families strictly controlled tenants, even claiming feudal sexual rights over peasant brides on their wedding nights. To bypass intense



family and community opposition, dedicated activists like Kamini Bala Barmani were forced to attend political meetings secretly under constant threat of severe domestic reprimand.

7.2 Police Violence:

Peasant women faced extreme physical brutality, intimidation, and custodial violence from state forces deployed to crush the agrarian agitation. During the violent Khanpur clash, police fired 119 rounds, killing Jashoda Barmani and Kaushalya Kamani, and subsequently forced hiding village women to strip to inspect injuries. Similarly, after the Nachole uprising, leader Ila Mitra was detained for four days and subjected to systematic police gang-rape and torture inside the lockup.

7.3 Economic Hardship:

Active political mobilization severely reduced the time available for indispensable household work, paddy husking, and agricultural labor, heavily aggravating family distress. Zamindars, jotedars, and moneylenders ruthlessly exploited this economic vulnerability by seizing crops, abusing wives, and physically torturing families at estate offices (kacharis) for unpaid rents. During these times of starvation and extreme financial crisis, destitute peasant parents were frequently forced to sell or hand over their daughters to moneylenders to settle unpaid debts.

7.4 Social Stigma:

Conservative societal elements frequently labeled active women organizers as disobedient, defiant, or profoundly immoral for breaking purdah and leaving their households. Traditional rural systems heavily penalized this breakdown of traditional roles, ensuring that women who openly stepped out faced widespread community censure.

Despite this severe social stigma and lack of institutional justice against zamindari abuse, marginalized Scheduled Caste, tribal, Rajbansi, and Polia women confidently discarded traditional seclusions to join the movement in massive numbers.

VIII. SOCIO-HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The extensive participation of women in the Tebhaga Movement left a profound legacy, producing several long-term socio-historical consequences:

8.1 Broadened the social base of agrarian movements:

The movement successfully mobilized sections of rural society that had previously remained completely unengaged. By breaking traditional barriers, elite organizers like Rani Mitra Dasgupta and local figures like Swarajdini Sarkar drew marginalized Scheduled Caste, tribal, Rajbansi, and Polia women into the struggle. This massive influx of poor peasant women converted a standard sharecropper agitation into an inclusive, widespread mass movement across Bengal.

8.2 Established women as active political agents rather than passive supporters:

Peasant women fundamentally transformed their roles from being mere domestic providers or passive recipients of famine charity into front-line political agents. Activists like Sarala Bala Pal in Jessore and the elderly leader Burima in Bogra directly led militant attacks against police forces. By executing operations independently, snatching rifles, and guarding villages, they proved that women were essential, independent leaders of radical resistance.

8.3 Contributed to the emergence of rural women's political consciousness in post-independence India:

The collective experience of resisting jotedars and navigating legal battles built a lasting political awareness among ordinary village women. Leaders like Ila Mitra educated peasants politically, which empowered rural women to independently challenge patriarchal systems and state authorities. This newly found consciousness ensured that rural women would no longer remain silent or invisible within the political landscape of post-independence India.



Influenced later peasant and women's movements throughout West Bengal: The tactical strategies pioneered during the Tebhaga agitation provided a definitive blueprint for future struggles in the region. The militant model of forming specialized Nari Bahinis and utilizing household implements as weapons was subsequently adopted in other critical agrarian struggles, such as the later campaigns in Kakdwip, 24 Parganas, where women harvested crops after the men were arrested.

Challenged conventional historiography by demonstrating that gender and class struggles were deeply interconnected:

The movement completely overturned traditional historical narratives by demonstrating that economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression could not be separated. When Jashoda Barmani sacrificed her life at Khanpur or when village women used peasant courts to punish abusive husbands, they proved that fighting landlordism was simultaneously a fight for gender justice, permanently linking class and gender struggles.

IX. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

The extensive mobilization of women during the 1946–1947 Tebhaga struggle fundamentally reshaped how modern scholars analyze subaltern resistance. Traditional historical accounts initially restricted their focus to formal institutional structures and economic class dynamics. However, subsequent feminist interventions challenged these narrow frameworks by bringing marginalized rural voices to the forefront. By documenting the revolutionary agency of peasant women, modern historiography has established that agrarian class conflicts and gender emancipation are deeply interconnected phenomena.

9.1 Overlooking Early Class and Party Narratives

Early histories of the Tebhaga Movement primarily emphasized economic conflict, class struggle, and Communist Party organization. Traditional academic frameworks focused almost entirely on institutional politics, male peasant leaders, and formal party directives. This narrow focus completely marginalized the structural realities of rural life. Consequently, these macro-level interpretations heavily overlooked women's grassroots contributions. Early historians viewed the agitation strictly through a monolithic lens of economic class, ignoring complex internal social dynamics entirely.

9.2 Interventions by Later Feminist Historians

Later historians and feminist scholars argued that these traditional interpretations overlooked women's contributions. They introduced gender-sensitive frameworks to reconstruct the history of subaltern resistance. These scholars proved that agrarian revolts cannot be understood without analyzing domestic and communal spaces. By shifting the focus to marginalized voices, gender historians demonstrated that women were not passive spectators. Instead, they were active agents who redefined the entire scope, depth, and radical potential of the peasant struggle.

9.3 Women's Labor as Economic Foundation

Gender historians have demonstrated that women's labour formed the economic foundation of agrarian production. Poor peasant, Scheduled Caste, and tribal women performed essential agricultural tasks, including grueling paddy husking and harvesting. Their vital work directly sustained the rural economy, yet traditional socioeconomic structures systematically obscured this contribution. When the 1946 movement demanded a two-thirds crop share, women's labor became central. It exposed how deeply jotedars and zamindars exploited female workers within the feudal system.

9.4 Transformation Into Community-Wide Struggle

Their participation transformed the movement into a community-wide struggle rather than a mere political agitation. Women expanded the conflict by actively converting familiar domestic spheres like fields and village paras into active defense zones. This grassroots mobilization brought entire households into the resistance. Spontaneous leadership by



local figures, such as the elderly Burima in Bogra and various Rajbansi or Polia mothers, ensured the struggle became a fully shared communal effort. They successfully brought resistance into daily village life.

9.5 Expansion of Public Identity

Political mobilization expanded women's public identity by permanently shifting rural women out of historical domestic isolation. Participation in mass demonstrations and specialized defense forces like the Nari Bahinis built immense civic confidence. Leaders like Ila Mitra provided critical political education, enabling women to speak openly in public assemblies. Activists such as Bimala Mandal of Midnapore directly negotiated with government officials. This collective political engagement shattered the traditional boundary of the purdah, establishing a respected public presence.

9.6 Challenging Patriarchal Power Structures

Rural women's activism challenged patriarchal power structures and entrenched feudal hierarchies simultaneously. In liberated Tebhaga elakas where oppressive landlords were driven away, women established independent peasant courts. These courts formally addressed gender discrimination, domestic harassment, and wife beating. By successfully employing social boycotts against abusive husbands, rural women utilized revolutionary circumstances to dismantle oppressive internal community hierarchies. This proved that external political liberation and internal social reform were completely inseparable goals.

9.7 Evolution of Institutional Resistance

A widespread protest emerged against domestic violence, showing organized female resistance well before 1946. For instance, when a husband beat his wife during a food dispute, female activists immediately defended her. They organized evening meetings to publicly reprimand abusive husbands. Activist Ajit Roy noted that Mahila Samitis formed in every village, holding weekly meetings. Volunteers actively detained, fined, and punished abusive husbands. This institutionalized resistance successfully eradicated deep-rooted social superstitions and patriarchal violence.

9.8 A Dual Social and Agrarian Renaissance

Recent scholarship therefore interprets the Tebhaga Movement as both an agrarian and gendered social movement. Modern historians present a dual interpretation by analyzing the incredible heroism of martyrs like Jashoda Barmani alongside extensive grassroots participation. They recognize Tebhaga as a landmark societal renaissance where class warfare and gender emancipation merged perfectly. Just like the shifting dynamics between landlords and tenants, gender relations in Bengal entered a completely new, egalitarian era of shared struggle.

X. CONCLUSION

The Tebhaga Movement remains a remarkable landmark of collective agrarian resistance in modern Indian history. During the intense 1946–1947 agitation, the pattern of marginalized women's involvement directly mirrored that of poor sharecroppers. Released from their traditionally subordinated roles, icons like Ila Mitra and Bimala Mandal successfully challenged deep-rooted structures of oppression, justifying their unusual public activism through these unusual revolutionary circumstances. Their active participation proved that rural women were indispensable agents of radical social change, rather than mere passive witnesses to a male-led economic conflict.

Beyond land disputes, rural women permanently disrupted traditional patriarchal norms across Bengal. Activists like the elderly Burima in Bogra led spontaneous local resistance, while martyrs like Jashoda Barmani at Khanpur faced severe police repression. However, a stark historical contradiction remained. Despite their extensive, heroic grassroots mobilization in the fields and village paras, very few of these revolutionary women were ultimately incorporated into formal institutional organizations or political parties. This lack of formal recognition highlights the enduring institutional barriers that subaltern women faced even within progressive peasant movements.



A comprehensive socio-historical analysis reveals that Tebhaga was both an economic struggle and a vital chapter for gender empowerment. The movement did not merely contest agricultural surplus; it fundamentally reshaped peasant politics and rural gender equality. Recognizing these diverse female contributions deeply enriches our contemporary understanding of India's freedom struggle, showing how class warfare and social emancipation became completely inseparable. Ultimately, the legacy of Tebhaga provides modern scholars with a profound framework to analyze how subaltern resistance can simultaneously challenge class exploitation and entrenched domestic hierarchies.

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