

**FROM CHUAR REBELLION TO THE NAXALITE UPSURGE:
THE LEGACY OF RESISTANCE IN MIDNAPORE**

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“From Chuar Rebellion to the Naxalite Upsurge: The Legacy of Resistance in Midnapore” submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Omprakash Mishra, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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In Loving Memory
of
My Beloved
Grandmothers,
Gita Mukherjee and Mandira Banerjee

Contents

	Page No.
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ii-iii</i>
<i>List of Tables, Figures and Maps</i>	<i>iv-v</i>
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	<i>vi-vii</i>
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>viii-xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xii-xiii</i>
Chapter-1	
Introduction to the Thesis	1-38
Chapter -2	
Colonial State Making, ‘Land to the Zamindar’and the Chuar Rebellion of Midnapore	39-84
Chapter -3	
Agrarian Setting of 20th Century Bengal (1900s-1940s): An Overview of the Rise of the Left, the Road to Tebhaga and the ‘Land to the Tiller’ logic	85-151
Chapter - 4	
Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s: An Overview of the Revolutionary Situation with Special Emphasis on its Impact on Students-Youths.....	152-207
Chapter -5	
The Naxalite Uprising in Midnapur & Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Frontier: Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora	208- 268
Chapter-6	
Conclusion to the Thesis	269-284
Select Bibliography	285-298
Annexure I – Interview Questionnaire	

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List of Figures, Maps and Tables

A. Figures and Maps	Page No.
Fig.1 Agrarian Structure at a Glance.....	8
Fig.2 Bengal-Jharkhand-Odisha Tri-junction.....	17
Fig.3 District Midnapore, West Bengal, 1961	18
Fig.4 District Singhbhum, Bihar, 1961	19
Fig.5 Sub-Divisional level of the <i>Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar</i>	143
Fig.6 Walls of College Street	198
Fig.7 Presidency College Magazine Cover (1968-1969)	199
Fig.8 Presidency College Magazine: Page 1 (1968-1969)	200
Fig.9 Presidency College Magazine: Page 3(1968-1969)	201
Fig.10 Presidency College Magazine: Page 4(1968-1969).....	202
Fig.11 The Mobilization Model: Charles Tilly	281
B. Tables	
2.1 Divisions of <i>Sarkar</i> Jaleswar	43
2.2 Sample Changes in Jurisdiction of Midnapore District	45
2.3 Midnapore District, 1872	46
2.4 Midnapore District, 1971	47
2.5 Land Revenue Demand in Midnapore (1760-1771)	49
2.6 Ordinary Rent Paying Tenures	50-51
2.7 Rent Free Tenures	52
2.8 Service Tenures	53
3.1 Zamindari Estates and Creation of Tenures in Selective Parganas of Midnapore, 1872	87-88
3.2 Pattern of Supply of Private Credit in India (1951-1952)	93
3.3 The Extent of Bargadari Cultivation in Some Districts of Bengal (1940-1950).....	97-98
3.4 Number of Bargadars in West Bengal Districts According to the Census of 1951 and the Survey and Settlement Operations (1957-1958).....	98
3.5 CPI Membership (1934-1957)	117

4.1	Electoral Performance of Congress and CPI in West Bengal (1952-1962)	154
4.2	Percentage of Valid Votes Polled by Communist Parties in West Bengal Legislative Assembly Elections (1952-1969)	157
5.1	Area Committees of the CPI (M-L) in Midnapore	209
5.2	Number of Inhabited Villages, Average Population per Village and Number of Villages per Hundred Square Miles in Debra and Gopiballavpur: Census 1961	213
5.3	1961 Primary Census Abstract: Midnapore District, Debra and Gopiballavpur	214
5.4	Scheduled Castes: Midnapore District, Debra and Gopiballavpur (1961).....	215
5.5	Scheduled Tribes: Midnapore District, Debra and Gopiballavpur (1961).....	217
5.6	Census 1961, District Singhbhum Classification of Workers (Rural), Cultivators and Agricultural Labourer	220
5.7	1971 Census Abstract: District – Singhbhum Division – Chotanagpur	220
5.8	Baharagora Anchal (Rural), 1961	221
5.9	Acts of Violence in Midnapore Between September 1969 to 1971	253
5.10	Status of Victims in Select Areas of Midnapore	256

List of Abbreviations

ABTA	All Bengal Teachers' Association
AICC	All India Congress Committee
AICCCR	All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries
AIKS	All India Kisan Sabha
AISF	All India Students Federation
AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
BBOBRC	Bengal Bihar Orissa Border Regional Committee
BDO	Block Development Officer
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BMP	Bihar Military Police
BPKS	Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha
BPSF	Bengal Provincial Students Federation
BS	Bangla Sambat/ Bengali Calendar
BVSG	Bengal Village Self Government Act (1921)
CM	Chief Minister
COMINTERN	Communist International
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI (M-L)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CPSU	Communist Party of Soviet Union
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
DIG	Deputy Inspector General
DM	District Magistrate
DSP	Deputy Superintendent of Police
EFR	Eastern Frontier Rifles

EIC	East India Company
IB	Intelligence Bureau
ICS	Indian Civil Service
IG	Inspector General
INC	Indian National Congress
J.L.R.O	Junior Land Reforms Officer
MARS	Mahila Atma Raksha Samity
MDC	Midnapur District Collectorate
MZC	Midnapur Zamindari Company
PC	Presidency Consolidation
PCAPA	Peoples' Committee Against Police Atrocities
PCSO	Presidency College Student Organization
PDF	Progressive Democratic Front
PIFRC	Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
PULF	People's United Left Front
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RCRC	Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDO	Sub-Divisional Officer
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UCRC	United Central Refugee Council
ULF	United Left Front
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives
WPP	Workers and Peasants Party

Glossary

<i>Abasthan</i>	Picketing /sit-in /camping- in; a protest strategy
<i>Abadkar</i>	A substantial cultivator assigned to reclaim a wasteland on rent agreement by a zamindar
<i>Abwab</i>	Miscellaneous cesses, imposts and charges levied by zamindars and public officers
<i>Adalat</i>	Court
<i>Adhiar</i>	Sharecropper
<i>Akhra</i>	Rustic gymnasium
<i>Alla Sicca</i>	Currency
<i>Aman</i>	Paddy cultivated around September to December
<i>Amla</i>	A bureaucratic official
<i>Anchal</i>	Sub-Division as per Bihar 1961 census; normally denotes a region
<i>Aus</i>	Paddy cultivated around April to June
<i>Badhna</i>	Festival where cattle and agricultural implements are worshipped
<i>Bagal</i>	shepherd/those who take care of and graze cattle
<i>Banti</i>	Fish knives
<i>Bargadar</i>	Sharecropper
<i>Benami</i>	Fictitious
<i>Bhadoi</i>	Harvest in relation to <i>Aus</i> paddy
<i>Bhadralok</i>	Bengali word for gentlefolk
<i>Bhadu-Tusu</i>	Folk festival, music and performance
<i>Bhag</i>	Rent as a fixed proportion of the harvest
<i>Bhagchashi</i>	Sharecropper
<i>Bigha</i>	A measure of land
<i>Burkundaz</i>	Armed guard of 18 th and 19 th century India
<i>Chakla</i>	Equivalent to district under Murshid Quli Khan's tenure
<i>Chakaran</i>	Service tenures
<i>Chowkidar</i>	Watchman or custodian
<i>Chuar</i>	A derogatory term used to refer to the tribals and lower castes in the Junglemahals
<i>Cos</i>	A measure of distance

<i>Cutcherry</i>	Public office
<i>Da</i>	Chopper
<i>Dadan</i>	Advance received by cultivator against security of crop
<i>Daffadar</i>	A non-commissioner officer in British-Indian military or police
<i>Dahi</i>	Laterite soil tracts unfit for cultivation
<i>Daroga</i>	Police Inspector
<i>Debottar</i>	Estates granted rent free the proceeds being appropriated to worship and support Hindu idols and temples
<i>Dhan</i>	Paddy
<i>Dhan Kata</i>	Paddy harvesting
<i>Dheki</i>	Paddle for husking paddy
<i>Diku</i>	Santali word meaning non-tribal
<i>Diwan</i>	Treasury or finance official in Mughal administrative structure
<i>Diwani</i>	Right to collect revenue and conduct administration
<i>Faujdar</i>	Military commander of a province in Mughal period
<i>Faujdari</i>	Criminal jurisdiction
<i>Gherao</i>	Encircle/occupy
<i>Gomastha</i>	Indian agents of the East India Company in charge of forming deals with craftsmen and weavers
<i>Haat</i>	Periodic village market
<i>Haimantic</i>	Harvest in relation to <i>Aman</i> paddy
<i>Hartal</i>	Strike
<i>Hul</i>	Santali word meaning revolt/ rebellion
<i>Hungama</i>	Turmoil
<i>Ijara</i>	Sub-infeudation settlement
<i>Ijaradar</i>	Holder of an <i>ijara</i>
<i>Jagir</i>	A type of feudal land grant
<i>Jagirdar</i>	Person in possession or charge of a <i>jagir</i>
<i>Jama</i>	Deposit
<i>Jatra</i>	Popular folk theatre in Bengal
<i>Jomi</i>	Land
<i>Jotedar</i>	Fixed- rent raiyat- tenants or settled occupancy holders holding effective power in agrarian structure

<i>Kabi gaan</i>	Folk art form which implies a verbal duel between poets in the form of a song
<i>Kamin</i>	Female house help/labourer
<i>Kanungo</i>	Person responsible for land revenue collection
<i>Khamar</i>	Harvest storage area and threshing floor
<i>Khanda</i>	Double-edged straight sword
<i>Khas</i>	Government owned
<i>Khetmajur</i>	Agricultural labourer
<i>Khudkhast raiyats</i>	Permanent resident cultivators of a village
<i>Kila</i>	Fort
<i>Krishak</i>	Peasant/ farmer
<i>Kulat</i>	Derivative of the word 'Kul' meaning riverbank
<i>Laal Selam</i>	Red Salute
<i>Langal</i>	Plough
<i>Lathi</i>	Stick
<i>Maan</i>	A container made of bamboo or cane
<i>Mahajan</i>	Moneylender
<i>Mahal</i>	Revenue unit or division
<i>Makar Sankranti</i>	Festivals and rituals connected to sun's transition from southern to northern hemispheres; celebrated at the end of <i>Aman</i> crop harvesting
<i>Malguzari</i>	A type of land revenue settlement
<i>Mandal</i>	Village head
<i>Moshaira</i>	Derived from Bengali word <i>mashohara</i> meaning due monthly share or allowance
<i>Muliya</i>	Male house help/labourer
<i>Musnud</i>	A cushioned seat used as thrones by native rulers in India; usage denotes throne
<i>Naib</i>	Arabic word for deputy or representative of authority
<i>Namal Khata</i>	Moving to lower alluvial regions for work; a term prevalent in Gopiballavpur
<i>Paik</i>	Armed henchmen of landlords; village watchmen
<i>Paikan Tenures</i>	Peculiar to Midnapore; given to paiks in the shape of military tenures some at low quit rents called <i>peshkash</i> and some free of all rent

<i>Paikhast Raiyats</i>	Cultivators on lands away from their residential villages
<i>Pargana</i>	Administrative subdivision of a district
<i>Patrika</i>	Magazine
<i>Patta</i>	Proof of ownership is the primary document that establishes legal ownership of land or property.
<i>Patwari</i>	Person responsible for maintaining land ownership records
<i>Peshkash</i>	Quit rent/tribute
<i>Pradhan</i>	Village head
<i>Raiyats</i>	Cultivator
<i>Raja</i>	King
<i>Ravi</i>	Harvest in relation to vegetables and pulses (around November /December to March)
<i>Sadar</i>	Main / headquarters
<i>Samiti</i>	Association
<i>Sanad</i>	Charter
<i>Sanja</i>	Rent as a certain fixed quantity of harvest irrespective of the total quantity produced
<i>Sarkar</i>	Equivalent to district
<i>Sirdar</i>	Military chief or leader
<i>Subah</i>	Province
<i>Taluk</i>	A group of villages organised for revenue purposes; administrative unit and a hereditary estate
<i>Talukdar</i>	Landholder in Mughal and British India responsible for tax collection from a taluk
<i>Tangi</i>	Axe
<i>Tehsildar</i>	A native collector of revenue
<i>Thana</i>	Police Station
<i>Thanadar</i>	Officer in charge of a <i>thana</i>
<i>Ulgulan</i>	‘Great Tumult’ associated with Birsa Munda
<i>Vastu</i>	Residential
<i>Zamindar</i>	Landowner with proprietary rights post Permanent Settlement; controller/holder of land responsible for revenue collection and remittance pre- Settlement
<i>Zillah</i>	District

Preface

The decision to attempt a micro level study on the district of Midnapore stems from the personal experience of working in the districts of West Midnapore and Jhargram (after bifurcation in 2017) for a decade. As a faculty member in an institute in Jhargram, daily interaction with the young students of the area as well as the locals, has been an asset in terms of gaining perspectives on various dominant issues in the area. My appointment in the institute in 2014 coincided with the ebbing tide of the Lalgarh upsurge of 2008 that had spiralled these areas outside state control. As a student of politics, becoming a regular resident in the Junglemahals could not have come at a better time. The term Junglemahals dating back to the colonial times suddenly re-emerged in newspapers, administrative and political circles denoting an area of dissidence. The fact that the romanticism associated with lateritic red soils, *sal* forest cover, beautifully painted tribal hamlets, folk songs and *dhamsa-madal* beats had an underlying saga of deprivation, alienation and underdevelopment became evident to the public eye. Visits to Belpahari region in 2015 was an eyeopener for an outsider like me, trained in premier ‘metropolitan’ institutes and habituated to comforts of middle-class urban life. All these together triggered an inquisitive mind to embark upon the quest to know more about this region.

Jhargram in 2014 was part of the West Midnapore district. Political leaders in street-corner meetings and rallies in the area were heard referring to ‘*Medinipurer sangrami aitihiya*’ in their speeches, a practice that continues till date. The phrase can be translated in essence to mean the revolutionary legacy of Midnapore. This inspired an attempt to delve into the literature on resistance in the ‘frontier’ zones of Bengal, the term frontier being understood in geographic, economic, political and cultural senses. Though the quest began with readings on Santal *Hul*, it was realised soon that the district has a legacy which dates to the early colonial period much before the *Hul*. It was at this juncture that the interest regarding a detailed study of the Chuar rebellion was born. The next literature that inspired the choice of the second resistance in this study was Santosh Rana’s *Rajnitir Ek Jiban* published in 2017. While studying the Naxalite movement as a student, the entire focus had been on the pivot of the movement in North Bengal. Naxalite upsurge in Midnapore was mentioned only as after-effects under the expanding influence of CPI (Marxist-Leninist). In course of reading various works on Naxalbari, the feeling dawned that this can be a prospective area of detailed research. Given the already existing interest on the Chuar rebellion, the quest for connecting these two resistances began

and the issue of land rights dawned as the common thematic bridge linking centuries of history together.

Thus, this study aims to examine the thematic, geographic and strategic interconnectedness of two armed resistances separated in timeline by centuries. Hence, divided by centuries and united by issues and strategies becomes the defining tagline of this study. Modern studies, to be successful, needs to be rooted in solid long term historical understanding. Neither the late 1960s Naxalite upsurge in the district nor the ultra-leftist Maoist phase of the 21st century, causally and circumstantially spring from a vacuum. Hence, exploration of the long historical lineage which in turn constitutes popular memory of the area becomes important for a wholesome understanding. Inclusion of Chuar rebellion in this study, thereby linking it to modern mainstream resistances, serves this purpose. Also, all modern movements require their exercise of consciousness creation and mobilisation. Recalling a glorious past of resistance is a fruitful mobilisation tactic, as it appeals to sentiments. Chuar rebellion of Midnapore forms part of that legacy.

As the literature on the Naxalite movement in Midnapore is limited, this study seeks to contribute a detailed historical, descriptive and analytical account of the Naxalite upsurge in Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora, thereby enriching the existing literature on the subject.

It is relevant to mention at this juncture that the district is referred to across literature as Midnapore, Midnapur or Medinipur. Colonial accounts tend to use Midnapore while post-colonial ones tend to use both Midnapur and Midnapore. In Bengali, the district is consistently referred to as Medinipur and in recent years this use has become the dominant one in English as well. In this study, the district has been referred to as Midnapore to maintain consistency. It must also be noted that widely used terms like zamindar, jotedar, bargadars, Chuar, paik etc. have not been italicised all throughout the text. Regarding names of persons, one instance needs special mention for clarity at the very outset. Ashim Chattopadhyay, one of the leaders of the Midnapore uprising, has been referred to across the text as Ashim Chatterjee, except in cases where his works in Bengali have been cited. Ashim Chattopadhyay and Ashim Chatterjee hence refer to the same person. Regarding the colonial accounts, it must be noted that the colonial spellings of many places have been retained. Also, many Bengali terms, sources and quotations have been used in this study for which suitable contextual explanations and translations have been provided for clear understanding.

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Thesis

From Chuar Rebellion to the Naxalite Upsurge: The Legacy of Resistance in Midnapore

The Context

The predominance of the rural sector, as expressed best by Mahatma Gandhi's famous saying, 'the soul of India lives in its villages', has been a feature of Indian society and economy across centuries. Hence agriculture, which forms the base of the socio-economic structure of the entire human civilisation itself, has been the predominant source of livelihood and revenue. The productive capacity of agriculture primarily depends on land and its quality. Land, especially productive one, is scarce and hence is contested. Control over land has been the locus of power struggles for centuries – a site for conquest, colonisation and resistance. 'Rights to land' hence has always been a controversial and sensitive area of deliberation. Land rights, in general, can be understood as legal rights to own, use, access, control, manage land and its resources. Such rights are linked to questions of livelihood, development, social justice and finally identity. The idea of property in land in the legal-rational sense is relatively new in India, as it was born out of her colonial experience. Resistances that shook early colonial India have a totally agrarian composition and can be directly linked to the revenue administration of the colonial state and experiments to find answer to the question -Who owns the land in India?

The genesis of colonial state in India can be traced to September 26, 1760. Mir Jafar's failure to pay financial compensation to the East India Company (hereinafter referred to as the Company) post Battle of Plassey (1757) led to the latter reaching an agreement with Mir Qasim, who after replacing Mir Jafar as the Nawab of Bengal, ceded revenues of the districts Burdwan, Midnapore¹ and Chittagong. This marks the commencement of British revenue administration in India. The next landmark was the Battle of Buxar (1764) where the combined forces of Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Oudh and Shah Alam II faced defeat in the hands of English troops under

¹ In this study, the district has been referred to as Midnapore to maintain consistency. The district is referred to across literature as Midnapore, Midnapur or Medinipur. Colonial accounts tend to use Midnapore while post-colonial ones tend to use both Midnapur and Midnapore. In Bengali, the district is consistently referred to as Medinipur and in recent years this use has become the dominant one in English as well. Given the period of study the geographical extent of the undivided district covers the present-day districts of Midnapore (East) / Purba Medinipur, Midnapore (West) / Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram. The administrative break up of undivided Midnapore into East and West was executed on January 1, 2002. Midnapore (West) was further administratively divided and Jhargram Subdivision was made a separate district with effect from April 4, 2017.

Hector Munro. In August 1765, Robert Clive negotiated two treaties in Allahabad- one with the Nawab of Oudh and the other with Shah Alam II, the second one being of significance in relation to Bengal, as by this treaty the Company acquired the *diwani* ² of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. This grant was a kind of legitimacy acquisition for the Company. As Romesh Dutt notes, 'though the Great Moghal had no real power, he was still the titular sovereign of India, and his charter gave the East India Company a legal status in the country.'³ Both these cases launched the Company in roles that they had no plans to venture into. To quote Firminger,

It is true to say that neither Plassey nor Buxar were fought to win territorial sovereignty for the East India Company or for the British Crown, although, of course, those battles were fought to maintain on the *musnud* of Murshidabad a ruler powerless to uproot the British factories. Although on some few occasions both the Court of Directors in London and their representatives in Bengal did assume a bellicose tone and although there were occasions when territorial acquisitions were distinctly coveted, yet we find that the Company was, on the whole, averse to the acquisition of "territory" or "possessions," and that their servants in Bengal, unless actuated by some momentous emergency, were unwilling to interfere in native politics or to depart from the position of traders.⁴

Acquisition of *diwani* implied that the Company was faced with the task of devising a system of revenue administration and define a role for themselves as an administrator in an alien territory. Understanding revenue collection required an understanding of land ownership and land rights. Based on their own native perception, they attempted to impose a legal -rational understanding of land ownership and state formation on a traditional socio-economic structure, generating a variety of fissures in the social fabric culminating in resistances.

Regarding construction of colonial power, Sudipta Kaviraj notes that the colonial state did not evolve out of the earlier Indian society. The traditional Hindu society was segmental. There was no hierarchy of classes presided over by a strong state. The social hierarchy was asymmetrical and so was the political control, economic power or status associated with each level i.e. higher rank in one did not necessarily mean higher rank in the other. Also, the society was a less integrated one in which the status of the state was marginal. The state had an economic influence on these communities but did not intrude into their everyday life processes and restructure relations as long as its demand for rent was satisfied. Even the Muslim rulers did not alter the structure. The colonial rule with its rationalist modernist discourse and

² Right to collect revenue and conduct administration

³ Romesh. C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India Under Early British Rule: From the Rise of British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837*, Vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1902), 35.

⁴ Walter. K. Firminger, *Introduction to the Fifth Report dated 1812* (Calcutta: R. Cambray and Co. 1917), iv.

worldview that was technical and scientific, acted in ways that altered this earlier format of state-society interrelationship.⁵

The process of transition of the Company from a trading company to an imperial power which went on for nearly a century (1757-1857) began from Bengal. In the 18th century, the authority of Bengal extended beyond delta plains or area inhabited by people who speak Bengali language. The province of Bihar was joined to Bengal intermittently from 1697 and permanently after 1733. To the south-west, the province of Orissa moved in and out in course of history and by 1707 enlarged Bengal had become an autonomous political entity.

By the 18th century, the importance of Bengal increased in economic terms and political factors had a role to play. Conditions were quite stable compared to the western and south-eastern fronts and outside invasions and internal feuds were in control here, all of which can be attributed to the centralised control of Murshid Quli Khan's regime.⁶ The importance can also be attributed to geography. In terms of physical features, Tirthankar Roy identifies five main subregions in the subcontinent – the 'submontane, the western desert and Savanna, the floodplains of river systems- Ganges and Indus and the seaboard'. The last two subregions- floodplains and seaboard- are typically the most productive in terms of output, revenue, means of subsistence, and thus are crucial for regime sustenance. Floodplains have historically served as the locations of strong imperial states, trading hubs, and thriving urban centres due to their capacity to produce valuable grains like wheat and rice, the availability of agricultural surplus, and their ease of transit.⁷ Bengal with these features of both floodplains and seaboard was thus a lucrative province for the Mughal empire and source of large share of its revenues.

This province has had a history of autonomy from central control. Mughal rule did not penetrate here until the 16th century.⁸ Even after it did, large inaccessible areas had remained outside the

⁵ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 52-55.

⁶ Peter. J. Marshall, *East India Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1976), 29-30.

⁷ Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of India 1857-1947*, 3rd Edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

⁸ Bengal was ruled by tributary Afghan rulers and nobles (Bengal Sultanate 1342-1576). In 1574, the young Sultan of Bengal Daud Karrani defied Akbar's nominal sovereignty. This led to Mughal-Afghan tensions and clashes. Faced with Mughal onslaught, Karrani had to withdraw and take refuge in Orissa. Under the leadership of Todar Mal, the Afghan King was forced into a battle at Tukaroi (known as Battle of Tukaroi/ Bajhaura/Mughalmari) on March 3, 1575 near present Midnapore. Victory in this battle permitted Akbar to finally annex Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the Mughal Empire. However, skirmishes continued after the battle. By late 1580s peace tended to prevail and Akbar sent Man Singh to set up a regular system of imperial administration in Bengal and Orissa.

purview of formal revenue administration established by them. The first resistance under study here is directly linked to attempts by British to bring such an area under their control.

The Perplexing Question of Property in Land, Permanent Settlement and ‘Land to the Zamindar’

The acquisition of *diwani* was just the beginning of a period of turmoil and confusion for the Company. The English experience regarding land was quite different from the system of tenures and rights that existed in India. Baden- Powell points out the difference between the ideas of the East and West regarding land in the following words,

In every country the ownership of land practically comes to mean whatever the development of customary tenures and the growth of ideas have made it to mean. There can hardly be any doubt that landownership in the abstract has, in the East, gradually acquired one meaning, and in the West, a somewhat different one. In English law there is no such thing as absolute ownership. There is only “an estate in land”. We have a fixed idea of an owner for every plot of land – large or small, on which all subordinate holders are tenants by a contract which ultimately depends on the competition rent or letting value of land. That is not the eastern idea.⁹

The period between 1765 till the introduction of Permanent Settlement by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 saw a variety of experiments in revenue management which created confusion. The right to cultivate land, the right to levy taxes on cultivators, and the right to grant taxation rights comprise the three-tier framework of rights in land administration that the British inherited. These layers correspond to the three main classes of landed interests: peasants, landlords or zamindars, and finally kings.¹⁰ The confusion can be best described using the words of L.S.S O’Malley, ‘in whom the rightful ownership of all those broad *beeghas* was vested, we knew no more than we did of the landed property of the moon’.¹¹

The question that has been central to any discourse on land was the status of the zamindar in the revenue hierarchy. In English usage the term zamindar translates to landlord. According to Irfan Habib, there has been quite a controversy whether this term is a British creation and

⁹ B.H Baden-Powell (1894, July). “Is the State the Owner of All Land in India”. *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Record*, VIII, nos.15 and 16 (July, 1894): 3, https://ignca.gov.in/Asi_data/25464.pdf. Also see B.H Baden- Powell, *The Land Systems of British India*, Vol. I, II & III (London: The Clarendon Press, 1892) and Nathaniel B. Halhed, *A Memoir on the Land Tenure and Principles of Taxation* (Calcutta: S. Smith & Co., 1832) for views of British legal experts and administrators trying to grasp the land question.

¹⁰ Roy, *The Economic History of India*, 24-25.

¹¹ L.S.S O’Malley, *History of Bengal Bihar and Orissa* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1925), 201. *Beegha* or *Bigha* is traditional unit of measurement of land area which varies considerably between 6805 sq. ft to 72,880 sq. ft. In West Bengal 1 bigha generally implies 14,400 sq. ft.

whether the word, when used in Mughal literature, bore the same sense as it came to be used later. The literal meaning of the word can be traced to Persian implying ‘controller or holder of *zamin* or land’. Habib traces the usage to early fourteenth century in terms like *marzban* explained as ‘overseer’ of a territory. The zamindar was usually expected to collect and remit land revenue. He was seen as a tax gatherer rather than a tax payer i.e. agents who collected the revenue. As long as they did their job they were not disturbed and in course of time their position became hereditary and transferable by sale or gift.¹² From the imperial times the zamindars have been classified across literature on the subject into four types – autonomous chiefs, frontier zamindars, big zamindars and petty /primary zamindars. Each type had their own relationship equation with the central administration. All zamindars had some kind of financial obligations towards the state which were generally of two types – tribute or *peshkash* and land revenue or *mal-wajib*. The *mal-wajib* zamindars had to pay state dues based on actual assessments of yields and scrutiny was quite strong. The zamindari claims of the autonomous chiefs emanated from their long leadership over their territories and not from revenue contracts or official grants. As long as they remained loyal, remitted tributes and rendered military service on demand, they were left to their own affairs. The frontier zamindaris were estates in the outlying parts of the province like the north-eastern and western frontiers of Bengal who enjoyed a large degree of independence and paid nominal *peshkash* in return for defending those fronts. In the account on Midnapore during colonial times, we will return to this category of zamindars. All these different categories were clubbed into a single sweeping category by the English experiments leading to the Permanent Settlement.

Private property in land was not officially established anywhere either on the King or the zamindar or peasant. Private property rights existed over the shares in such produce of the land as was left after the payment of land revenue. Neither Hindu nor Mohammedan law claimed the sovereign to be the owner of all land. From time immemorial the sovereign power recognised right to a portion of the produce of the soil or of its value. Abul Fazl in his work justifies the imposition of taxes not on the basis of right of ownership but on the basis of social contract by which the sovereign obtained remuneration through taxation in return for providing

¹² Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* ,3rd Edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 169, 213; O’ Malley, *History of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa*, 256.

protection and justice to subjects.¹³ *Manusamhitā* also has detailed provisions regarding land rights, taxation, share of produce etc. For instance, Chapter VII, *mantra* 130 states,

*Pañchāśad bhāga ādeyo rājñā paśuhiraṇyayoḥ/
Dhānyānām aṣṭamo bhāgoḥ śaṣṭho dvādaśa eva vā||*¹⁴

(For sale of valuable stuffs like gold and animal, the King was entitled to 1/50th of its profit as annual tax. Depending on the nature of soil and the labour required to cultivate the soil, the King was entitled to 1/6th, 1/8th or 1/12th of paddy produce or other crop as tax)

The logic of land as property of the first tiller can be found here. Chapter IX, *mantra* 44 states¹⁵

*Pr̥thor api imām pr̥thivīm bharyām pūrvavido viduḥ/
Sthānucchedasya kedaram āhu śalyavato mṛgam||*

(Just like a deer becomes the property of the individual who hits it with an arrow, proprietary right on land belongs to the individual who reclaims it from waste and tills it)

This appears similar to Locke's labour theory of property. Locke believed that everyone has an equal right to life, health, freedom, and property. Since everyone has an inherent right to some possessions in order to survive, owning property was inevitable. The spatial enclosure of personally worked land transformed common property to private one based on application of labour to the soil. The individuals who had laboured and enclosed the land were therefore the rightful owners. Since individually acquired, enclosed and intensively farmed fields were more productive than lands held in common by subsistence-based peasants, individual land appropriation as property was both necessary and desirable. In their endeavour to define proprietary right in India, British regulations governing land usage and ownership leading to the Permanent Settlement were mostly based on this Lockean logic of production efficiency.¹⁶

Given such logic of ownership, in pre-colonial India the cultivators should have been the proprietors but as he recognised the zamindar's right to give him land to till, he was not. To quote Habib, "he was a semi serf, not a free agent". The peasant had permanent and hereditary rights conditioned on the capability to cultivate and as long as they did so, fear of eviction was

¹³ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, 290-91 as cited in Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 123.

¹⁴ Dr. Manabendu Bandyopadhyay Shastri, *Manusamhitā* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, B.S 1419/2012), 689.

¹⁵ Bandyopadhyay Shastri, *Manusamhitā*, 905.

¹⁶ John Locke, "Second Treatise on Civil Government", in *John Locke, Two Treatises of Government*, ed., Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 285-302.

not present as land to labour ratio was in favour of the latter. According to Habib ‘the system contained a network of transferable rights and obligations with different claimants, the King or his assignee, the zamindar and finally the peasant, to differently defined shares in the produce from the same land’.¹⁷ The confusion of the Company in grasping the revenue scenario is evident from the following words of an ICS officer in this regard as quoted by Rajat and Ratna Ray,

There is no ownership of land, but simply a system of possessory interests. These interests are piled one on top of another, and none can be got rid of unless the interest holder fails to pay his dues to his superior landlord ... It is quite obvious that with a system like this it is impossible for any one interest holder to plan improvements; and the difficulties of getting all of the interest holders to agree on an improvement policy are very great.¹⁸

The intention of the Company regarding revenue assessment and administration was maximisation of monetary gains and attempts to extract them without a clear understanding of the land rights and revenue collection presented a baffling problem. The whole revenue administration since the grant of the *diwani* to Permanent Settlement passed through the administrations of Robert Clive (1765-1767), Harry Verlest (1767-1769), John Cartier (1769-1772), Warren Hastings (1772 as Governor, 1773-1785 as Governor General) and finally Charles Cornwallis (1786-1793).¹⁹ Confusion ranged from the stage of assessment to collection the most drastic effect of which was the Bengal Famine of 1770. 1784 was a landmark year for revenue administration of the Company. The ‘Act for Better Regulation and Management of the East India Company’ was passed by the Parliament which aimed at settling and establishing permanent rules for collections of tributes, rents and services of zamindars, taluqdars and other native landholders. Lord Cornwallis was sent to carry out the provisions of this Act. Intense debates went on in administrative circles between prominent officials like Alexander Dow, Henry Patullo, Phillip Francis, Thomas Law, John Shore, John Grant and finally Cornwallis all of whom criticised policies which wreaked havoc like Hasting’s Farming System. The common solution was vesting of statutory right of property in a class to simplify revenue administration

¹⁷ Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 135.

¹⁸ Rajat. K. Ray, R., & Ratna, Ray, “Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal”. *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no.1 (1975): 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311798>.

¹⁹ For details on all the revenue collection experiments check Ananda Bhattacharya, ed., *F.D Ascoli: Early Revenue History of Bengal and the Fifth Report, 1812* (Delhi: Manohar, 2019). Details on all revenue administration models before Permanent Settlement is available in the subsection titled ‘Summary of the Different Systems of Government Antecedent to 1784’ of the *Fifth Report*. *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company*, dated 28th of July 1812 originally published in London, was reprinted in Calcutta by Walter Kelly Firminger, Archdeacon of Calcutta in three volumes. References to the Fifth Report in this thesis has been drawn from Firminger’s volume, *Introduction to the Fifth Report dated 1812*. (Calcutta: R.Cambray and Co, 1917).

and improve agriculture. The result was Lord Cornwallis's Proclamation of 22nd March, 1793 with its 48 regulations which constituted the creation of the notion of private property in land. The property right in land was for the first time officially vested in the zamindar and the assessments were fixed 'for ever'.²⁰ The Chuar resistances (1767-1800) that shook the administration during this period in Midnapore is directly linked to the imposition of formal revenue administration in a customary agrarian setting and infringement on special land rights in the first half, while in the second half it was a reaction to the effects of Permanent Settlement. The first half of the present study deals with this aspect of land-resistance dynamics in the colonial setting.

'Land to the Tiller' and Agrarian Resistances in 20th Century Bengal

The post-colonial agrarian setting is not a sharp break from its colonial counterpart. It is built upon a plethora of continuities, the biggest one being the effects of Permanent Settlement. The movements that shook India at the verge of independence are linked to the exploiter -exploited relationships, as they evolved post-Settlement. One significant change that developed in the agrarian hierarchy was decline in the position of the traditional zamindars and rise of the jotedar class. The structure is roughly presented in the figure below.

Fig.1
Agrarian Structure at a Glance

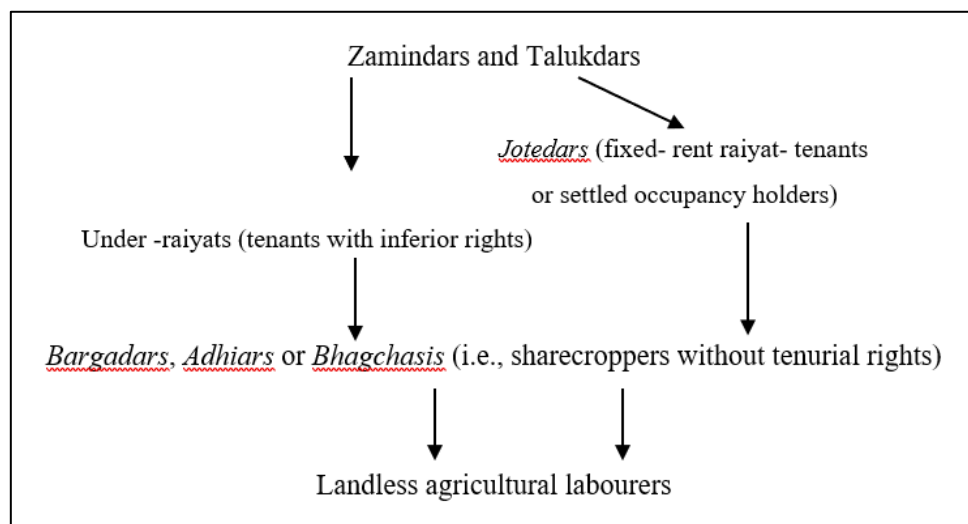


Fig. 1: Adopted from D.N Dhanagare, "Peasant Protest and Politics: The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal (India), 1946-47", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 3, no.3 (1976) :361, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066157608437988>.

²⁰ For various debates leading to the idea of Permanent Settlement see Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan and Permanent Black in association with Ashoka University, 2016) and for full details on the provisions of Permanent Settlement refer to *The Fifth Report* subsection titled 'On the Reforms Introduced by Earl Cornwallis', 19-37.

As we move into the 20th century, the jotedar- bargadar equation and feudal relations of exploitation became the key feature of agrarian relations in major portions of Bengal. This was topped by exploitation by moneylenders or *mahajans* who were the major source of agricultural finance. Over time the traditional moneylenders also declined leading to the rise of the jotedar-mahajan as the chief agrarian exploiter. Droughts, famines and market relations compounded their existential problems.

The economic and political climate necessary for the rise of the Communist Party of India (CPI) was provided by the dismal condition of this class of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers and the policy vacuum of the Indian National Congress (INC) regarding their plight and redressal of grievances. It was the Left mobilisation of these lower rungs of the agrarian hierarchy leading to movements all over Bengal which culminated in the Tebhaga movement and finally Naxalbari. The slogans '*chashir haate jomi chai*' or '*langal jaar jomi taar*', translating in essence as the phrase 'land to the tiller' forms the crux of land and agrarian reform demands of such movements. This slogan always evokes the image of red flags in the hands of the peasants confronting the landowners and the state. It is not just a political demand but also a question of public policy and social justice. Land reforms have been a consistent agenda in policy circles since independence. Land reform normally includes abolition of intermediaries, protection of tenants against eviction, control of land rents, consolidation of land holding, prevention of fragmentation, transfer of ownership rights to tenants, imposition of ceilings on the amount of land that can be held by one person or family unit, distribution of surplus land among the landless and others and settlement of landless agricultural workers.

Ronald Herring in his work notes three policy models of reforms with their variants and combinations which can be traced in the entire South Asian region. First is the intervention-regulatory model of tenure reform. In this the terms in which non-owning cultivators hold lands are readjusted like regulation and lowering of rents and providing tenure security. In this no fundamental alteration is witnessed in the social organisation of production. The second type is the ceiling -redistributive model in which an upper limit or ceiling is placed on agricultural holdings, lands excess of the ceiling is appropriated by state with or without compensation and redistributed among landless or poor cultivators either as grants or at some cost. The third alternative is the radical 'land to the tiller' logic based on the normative ideal of a classical peasant centric society and economy, in which the landlord -tenant organisation of production is altered. The institution of rent is abolished and cultivators become owners of the land they

till. A very low ceiling becomes implicit as no family would deserve any more land than they can till.²¹

Tenure reforms generally are the first to be applied by conservative regimes desiring minimal changes but also seeking to prevent agrarian unrest. In the Indian context the example of Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 can be provided which tried to protect tenants by providing them with security of tenure, fair rent and legal protection from eviction. Such actions however led to mass eviction of sharecroppers by landlords who became insecure regarding conferment of tenancy rights. The Land Revenue Commission Report of 1940 recommended abolition of the zamindari system, grant of direct tenancy rights to the sharecroppers and reducing the share of produce legally recoverable from them from half to one third. Such recommendations became the catalyst to the launch of Tebhaga movement at the verge of independence. The Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee Report recognised that rural society needed transformation and land tenure structure was outdated and unjust to support a modern state, thereby recommending abolition of intermediaries.²²

This brings us to the ceiling-redistributive category of reforms. The Constitution (First Amendment) Act of 1951 effected the abolition of zamindari. Various state governments on their own initiative passed laws intended to remove zamindari, impose ceiling on holdings and redistribute lands excess of ceiling like the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953.²³ Based on the logic of distributive justice, these reforms aimed at eradicating feudal relations by removing intermediaries. However, in the implementation stage they failed on numerous fronts like existence of clauses of retentions and exemptions, fictitious transfers and asymmetrical access to legal recourse. Also, dependency for livelihood added to complications. Such reforms failed in protecting the traditional rights of the tenants and also failed to grant them new rights. In many cases reforms were promulgated by ruling elites who themselves depended on agrarian elites for votes. The Left (at that point, CPI) strongly criticised the Zamindari Abolition Laws, as not bringing in any substantial change and also opposed the issue of compensations for

²¹ Ronald J. Herring, *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 8-9.

²² For full recommendations see All India Congress Committee, *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* (New Delhi: All-India Congress Committee, 1949).

²³ Government of West Bengal, *The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953*, Calcutta.
<https://wbxpress.com/west-bengal-estates-acquisition-act-1953/>.

acquisition. Land rights to the cultivator became the central mobilisation point for the Party.²⁴ The overall situation that prevailed in Bengal after independence, provided the ground for the Communist Parties, CPI and CPI (Marxist), to become part of a ruling coalition in 1967. However once in government, they faced the problem of converting the 'land to the tiller' logic to solid legislation and execution. The Left forces despite their revolutionary promises failed on account of strategic and tactical dilemmas, paving the way for further radicalisation within their ranks leading to the Naxalbari movement. As Herring aptly notes,

Once land is conceptualized as a 'bundle of rights' rather than a simple commodity or patch of soil, "land to the tiller" takes on a spectrum of meanings, from redistribution of a minimal package of rights (transferability, hereditary security, specified share of product) to transfer of the full bundle of proprietary rights, we usually term ownership.²⁵

Real and effective agrarian reforms are supposed to reorganise production relations, property structures, and the distribution of power and privilege. The complexity of finding solution to these layered issues results in any reform measure becoming a resource of politics, both electoral and revolutionary. This entire study keeps land rights as the central theme in its account and analysis of the politics of resistance in one particular district of Bengal and also thematically linking it to its revolutionary legacy. Two main resistances in the district divided by almost two centuries has been deliberately chosen to highlight the continuity of the link between land rights and resistance. If the Chuar rebellion (1767-1800) was about loss of special land privileges by a community along with the effects of Permanent Settlement clauses on the traditional zamindars, the Left mobilised movements of post-colonial Midnapore (1967-1971) was a reaction to the feudal system of exploitation that was entrenched by the effects of the Settlement, thereby demanding its abolition along with claims of land usage rights by the actual tillers of the soil.

Why Midnapore? An Overview of the Area under Study

In 2008, Bengal was in the cusp of an uprising led by the CPI (Maoist) that spiralled certain parts of the state outside administrative control. The CPI (Marxist-Leninist) People's War Group is noted to have been active in the Lalgah-Belpahari-Binpur-Salboni area since the

²⁴ Views of the Communist Party of India in this regard can be gauged from, Communist Party of India, *On the Agrarian Question in India* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1949).

²⁵ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 13.

1990s.²⁶ Stray incidents of attack had been reported in this area before the final act of attack on the convoy of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in November 2008 that triggered the later events. Lalgarh in the West Midnapore district (currently in Jhargram district) became the focal point of the Left-wing extremism that engulfed different parts of the district and some in neighbouring ones as well.

Resistance in this zone is not a new phenomenon. Time and again since the colonial period this area has risen in headline grabbing rebellions. This zone stands different from the Gangetic Bengal plains and has plateau topography as it is located on the extension of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, making it conducive to asymmetrical resistances against state machinery. The cultural geography is also different from the plains. The laterite red soil, evergreen *sal* forest cover, tribal hamlets with their beautifully painted houses, people in bright coloured traditional attire present a picture-perfect locale where one can feel the aura of romanticism in folk songs and *dhamsa – madal*²⁷ beats, which in turn has been a rich source of inspiration for Bengali art and literature. On the other hand, the same soil reeks of deprivation, alienation and underdevelopment. Such has been the level of deprivation that hunger deaths took place as late as in 2004 at Amlashol village under Banspahari panchayat in the Belpahari Block of West Midnapore district which in turn came to be enlisted as one of the most backward and underdeveloped districts in the whole country. Though the Lalgarh upsurge of the CPI (Maoist) does not feature directly in the study undertaken here, this can be considered as a continuation of a legacy of resistance in the region as well in the entire district from its undivided days. The 2008 upsurge brought into focus a renewed interest in understanding the region and exploring the causes of frustration that became the rallying point of the Left extremism. The Peoples' Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) in their third letter dated May 24, 2010 stated,

155 years have gone by after the Santhal Rebellion. Much water have flown down the Ganges. British colonizers are gone, giving place to the Congress rulers. During these years the Congress and the BJP in the Centre and in the state the Congress and for the last 30 years the Left Front under CPM leadership have enjoyed power. But in the lives of our Santhal, Kurmi, Ho, Munda, Bhumij and other Adivasis practically no change has come. The struggle that we waged in 1855 for our right to *jal –jangal-jamin* goes on even today, in 2010.²⁸

²⁶ Snigdhendru Bhattacharya, *Lalgarh and the Legend of Kishanji: Tales from India's Maoist Movement* (Noida, India: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016), 9.

²⁷ Tribal folk musical instruments.

²⁸ Peoples' Committee against Police Atrocities, *Letters from Lalgarh: The Complete Collection of Letters from the Peoples' Committee against Police Atrocities* (Kolkata: Setu Prakashani and Sanhati, 2013).

As discussed in the previous section, the central thematic bridge connecting centuries of history of resistance has been identified as land rights, agrarian relations and resultant exploitation. The PCAPA slogan of rights to *jal-jangal-jamin* (water-forest-land) validates the continuity of the issue in the region. Resistances are not born in vacuum. The repository of the past is an important reference point for analysing the present and hence this study tends to go back in time and bring a centuries old resistance back into mainstream history, thereby connecting it to modern resistances.

In this research work, the first focus of discussion is the Chuar rebellion (1767-1800). The first phase of the rebellion was a reaction to Company's imposition of revenue administration in the western half of undivided Midnapore and the second phase was a reaction to the effects of Decennial Settlement followed by the Permanent Settlement. In the first phase, the areas that took up arms against the state had been 'zones of anomaly' in the emerging 'governmentality of colonial rule'.²⁹ The first phase was concentrated in the south-western half of modern Bengal (Bengal -Jharkhand-Odisha tri-junction). Documented, systematic records especially administrative ones before the British period are not readily available on this region. Before the British, the nature of rule penetration in the area was customary and even in revenue terms, relations were tribute paying rather than based on formal assessments. The colonial rulers in their attempt to create a modern state and simplify administration made forays into the impenetrable jungles for initial purposes of revenue extraction. Midnapore was ceded to the Company in September, 1760 and military expeditions were required to bring the jungle chieftains of these areas to comply with the revenue demands. The area under question had and still has a predominantly tribal population. The tribal communities across the world have been mobile slash and burn people and to simplify the classic state functions of taxation, conscription and prevention of rebellion, it has been the state project to settle these mobile people (sedenterization) into fixed settlement.³⁰ Here, it was no exception. Writing in the context of rural settlement and production, Scott states that maximising the productive settled population in state spaces while extracting resources from or neutralising non-state spaces has been the function of statecraft. These latter zones play disruptive roles both practically and symbolically. These areas and the people who inhabited them were models of impoliteness, chaos, and barbarism. They also provided havens for evading peasants, rebels, bandits, and other

²⁹ K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.

³⁰ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 2.

individuals who posed a threat to the central and state areas. The ecosystems of such spaces may differ in elevation or have similar characteristics, such as being largely ‘impenetrable’ and ‘wild, trackless, labyrinthine, inhospitable’, having a dispersed or migratory population, or being unpromising locations for appropriation of surplus.³¹ South-western Bengal fulfilled all the criteria of non -state spaces as described above and it became the colonial mission to extend state machinery in these areas. The Permanent Settlement framework when imposed brought about drastic changes in the socio-economic-cultural life of the area, disrupted the traditional functioning in these areas ushering the second phase of the Chuar rebellion, which in turn was met with state coercion.

This uprising-coercion-conciliation dynamic has been a feature of this zone in the post-colonial period as well. Acts of peoples’ violent rebellion against state institutions across a temporal landscape mark the continuities of colonial and post-colonial ideological contestation between the state and its subjects. Colonial period exemplified primarily relations of domination which continued in the post-colonial setting. The post-colonial state also inherited the reciprocal violence between state and its subjects.³² As Scott observes, relations of domination are at the same time relations of resistance. It involves the use of power to extract work, production, services and taxes against the will of the dominated and generates friction.³³ The post-colonial state with the institutions of parliamentary democracy had a hegemonic claim based on promises of a better life. Scott notes that any hegemonic claim which involves extending promises to subordinate groups to generate their consent for a particular social and political order opens up ways to social conflict.³⁴ This happens when such promises are not honoured. The initial post -independence euphoria with all the promises of betterment faded over time creating a crisis in such hegemonic claims and through this vacuum the Naxalite movement of the 1960s -1970s found its validity and support base.

It is interesting to note that the zones of resistance of the early colonial India somehow coincide with the Naxal activities in the post -colonial period in this zone. This indicates that the hegemony creation in these zones has had its flaws. Hence in this context understanding the scenario requires attention to the roots of poverty, misery, degradation and injustice suffered

³¹ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 187.

³² Swati Parashar, “Colonial legacies, armed revolts and state violence: The Maoist movement in India”, *Third World Quarterly* 40, no.2 (2019): 338, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1576517>.

³³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 45.

³⁴ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 77.

by large sections of the people that date back to pre-independence periods. It is also necessary to comprehend, recognise and empathise with the struggles, unrest and ideas emanating from exploitation, oppression and domination that often became unbearable.³⁵ If the accounts on the rebel areas in Midnapore during the 1960s are noted, the plight of the participants and the grounds of mobilisation appear continuous across centuries. Writing in 1918, J M Macphail provided the following description of the Santal condition,

The Santal's ideal is agriculture. The work in which he excels is reclaiming wasteland. He will settle on some stony hill side where even his goats find a difficulty in getting food to eat. He will gradually clear the jungle raising first a crop of Indian corn or millet and terrace up the hill side or dam to form fields... No one suffers more than he does from the besetting evil of the East, indebtedness to the rapacious moneylender. He has probably inherited a debt from his father to whom it was bequeathed by his grandfather, successive generations of cultivators being practically enslaved to successive generations of moneylenders...³⁶

Local folk songs and performances, if noted minutely, carry the same saga even today. A *pat* song (a type of folk song) sung locally in Jamboni, Jhargram during performances as collected by Ranabir Samaddar for one of his works, can be quoted as follows,

গ্রামের মহাজন সুদে বাড়ায় টাকা,
কলসি ভরা টাকা খড় মাটি ঢাকা।
লুটে লয় থালা বাটি কাড়ে ঘরদোর ,
দারোগার মদত পেয়ে বাড়ে যত জোর।
মাটি কাটিয়ে মহাজন ছাড়ে না কড়ি ,
চাইলে চাল তারা বাঁধত জোর করি ।
বড় দুখ দিত সব হারামজাদা যত,
মেয়েদের রেখে দিত কাঁদত তারা কত।
অনেক দুখে সাঁওতাল যত ধরেছিল পণ ,
করবে লড়াই ধরবে টাপ্পি আছে যত জন।
সাঁওতাল মেয়ে সেজে ছেলে ধরেছিল তীর ,
তাদের কথা বই লিখা হয়না তারা কত বীর।
সিধু কানু প্রান দিল গ্রামের সবাই কাঁদে ,
আজও আমরা পড়ি মহাজনের ফাঁদে।

The moneylenders in the village increases interest rates,
and keep their rupee filled pitcher under straw and soil.
They snatch out utensils and take away our hearth and home,
backed by police they increase their power.
They make us dig and cut earth and do not pay for that,

³⁵ Bernard. D' Mello, *India after Naxalbari: Unfinished History* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2018),13.

³⁶ Macphail, J.M., "The Santals", *The Calcutta Review*, no.293 (October 1918), 390.

on being asked to pay us in rice, they tie us instead with ropes.
 They gave us a lot of sorrow
 and kept our women and made them cry.
 The Santhals resolved to fight with arrows and spears,
 even Santhal women picked up arrows dressed up as men.
 Yet books are rarely written on their heroism,
 Sidhu Kanu died and all villagers wept for them.
 Now we are in the traps of moneylenders again.³⁷

The revolutionary uprising that saw the peasant community up in arms against the state and created an international stir was in Naxalbari in 1967 which in turn gave birth to the Communist Party of India (Marxist –Leninist). The movement had a phenomenal impact across all levels of society and especially impacted the young mind. Triggered by the turbulent decades of post-colonial Bengal and crisis of expectations and armed with a revolutionary ideology espoused by Charu Mazumdar, a section of the students-youths moved to certain areas of Midnapore to liberate the rural exploited sections from their hardships. The Midnapore uprising was also witnessed predominantly in the tribal inhabited areas and participation dynamics indicate at greater lower caste-tribe involvement. The Naxalite leadership of the CPI (M-L) organising committee of these areas mobilised large number of landless labourers and sharecroppers. There were attacks on police parties, series of assassinations and raids in the houses of landlords. Continuities can be noted even in strategies of rebels and counter -insurgency strategies of the state from colonial to the post-colonial periods. The district has had a legacy of radical resistance dating back to colonial period passing through the nationalist phase, Naxalite phase and the Maoist phase of the 21st century. This continuity has been the primary consideration for its selection as the area of study.

The following maps will provide a basic idea regarding the area under focus in this study. The first map (Fig. 2) is a simple depiction of the tri-junction area of the current states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha to clarify the frontier nature of the area covered by the resistances. The second (Fig.3) and third (Fig. 4) maps have been adopted from the Census Reports (1961) of West Bengal and Bihar respectively to highlight the main areas of the district affected by the Naxalite upsurge. In the same maps, some of the areas affected by the Chuar rebellion has also been demarcated to depict the geographical overlap of the areas affected by the two resistances, temporally separated by nearly two centuries.

³⁷Ranabir Samaddar, *Memory, Identity, Power: Politics in the Janglemehals 1890-1950*, 2nd Edition (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013), 238-239. Song translated into English by Partha Chatterjee.

Fig.2

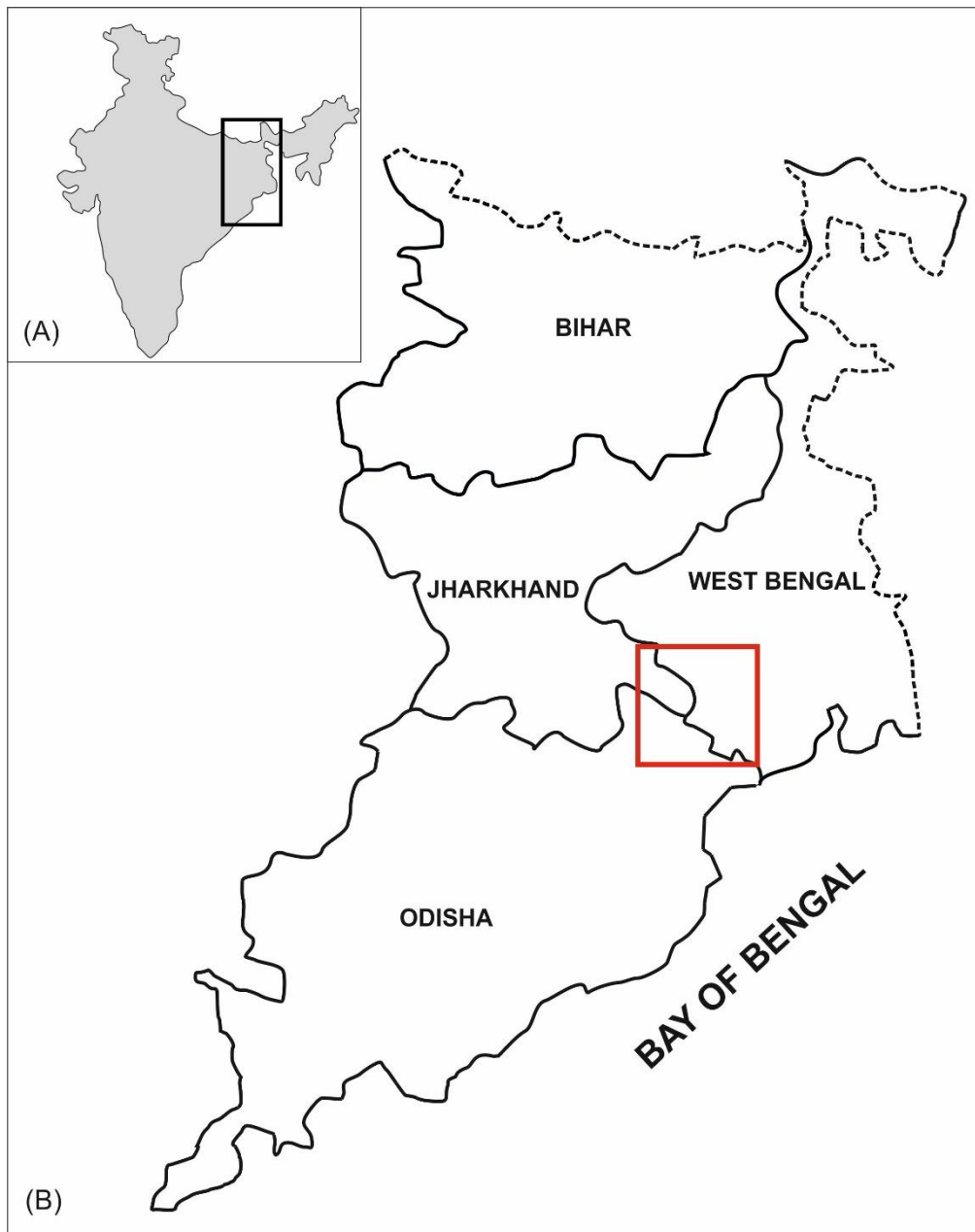
Bengal-Jharkhand-Odisha Tri-Junction

Fig 2 (B) depicts the geographical frontiers of the current states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha and the red box signifies the tri-junction area of the three states as the area of study.

Fig 2 (A) in the inset depicts the location of the area of study in the map of India.

Fig. 3

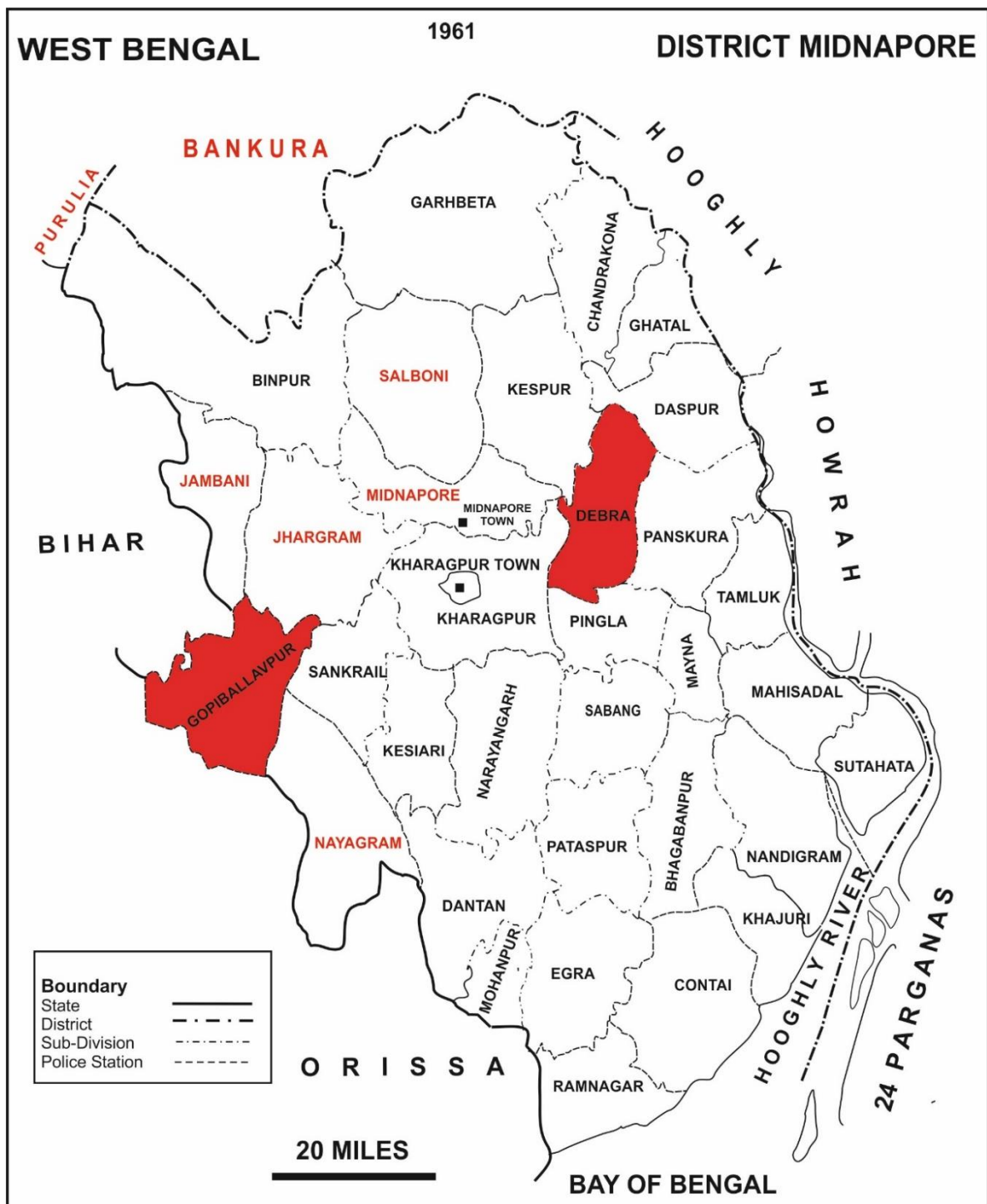


Fig. 3 depicts the frontiers and the areas of the Midnapore district in 1961 and has been adopted from B. Ray, *Census 1961 West Bengal: District Census Handbook, Midnapore*, Vol I (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1966).

The areas coloured in red, Debra and Gopiballavpur, signify the resistance zones of the Naxalite period. The red lettered areas depict the primary areas affected by Chuar rebellion including Gopiballavpur. The locations of the Chuar rebellion are scattered across the demarcated areas (red lettered) and in Bihar and Orissa.

Fig. 4

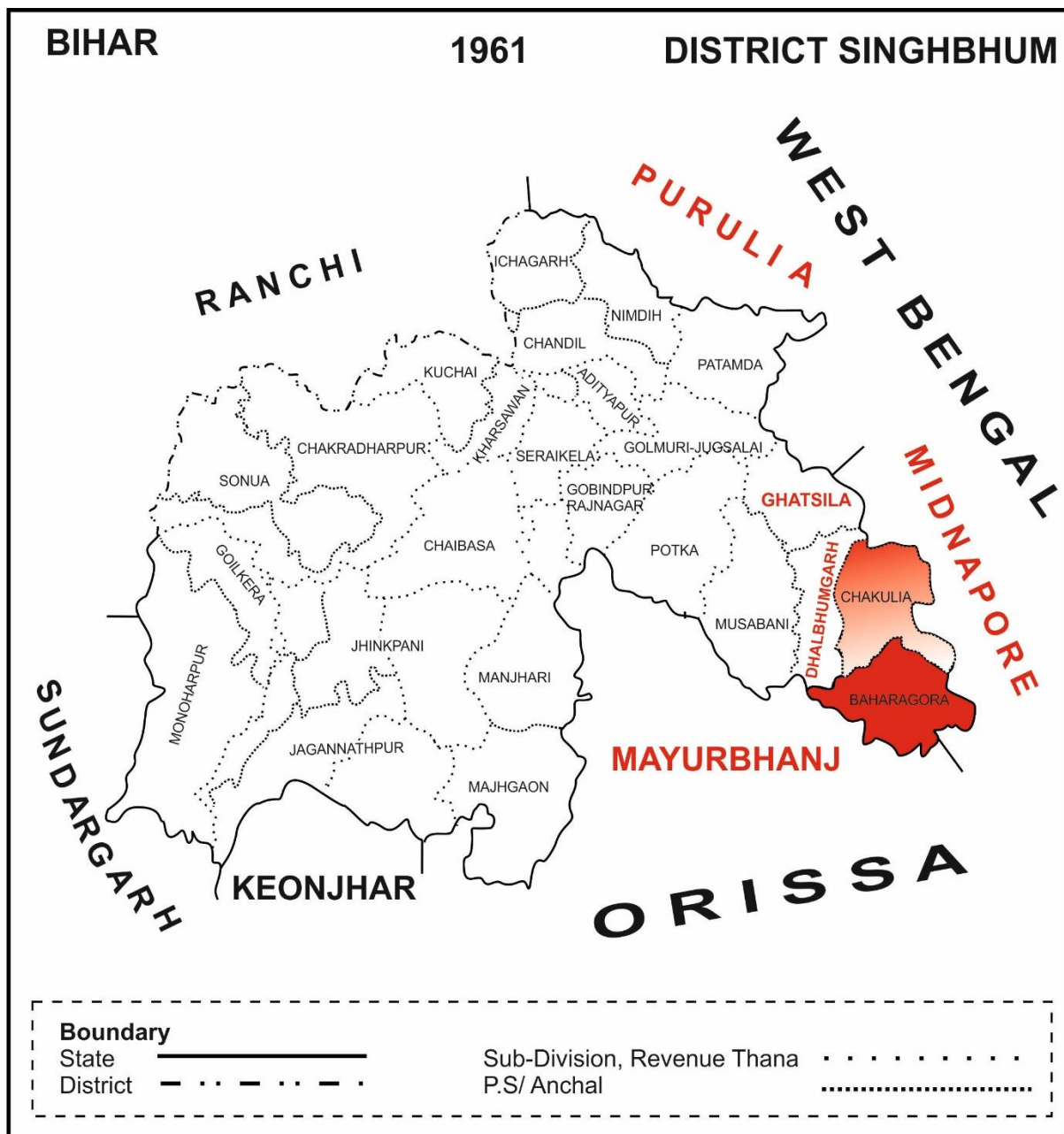


Fig. 4 depicts the frontiers and the areas of the Singhbhum district in 1961 and has been adopted from S.D Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar: District Census Handbook 17, Singhbhum* (Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1967).

The areas coloured in red, Baharagora and Chakulia, signify the resistance zones of the Naxalite period. Difference in shades of red indicate level of intensity. The red lettered areas depict the primary areas affected by Chuar rebellion including Chakulia. The locations of the Chuar rebellion are scattered across the demarcated zones (red lettered) in the district and in the neighbouring districts of West Bengal and Orissa.

Review of Literature

The study has two periods under scanner, the early colonial period and the post-colonial period of Bengal till the mid-1970s linked by the theme of land rights. The two thematically, geographically and strategically linked resistances covered in the study are the Chuar rebellion and the Naxalite uprising in Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora. Given the span of study in terms of issues to be covered and linkages explored, the variety of literature is huge. Hence the review of literature can be divided thematically to cover the main issues as follows,

- Dilemmas regarding land rights and ownership leading up to the Permanent Settlement.
- Historical-descriptive accounts of colonial administration, the nature of area under study during the colonial period and the Chuar rebellion.
- Evolution of the agrarian structure post Permanent Settlement thereby connecting the colonial to the post-colonial and the rise of the Communist forces at the expense of the Congress.
- Revolutionary legacy of Midnapore in the 20th century.
- The ‘revolutionary’ situation in Bengal during the 1950s and 1960s leading up to the incident in Naxalbari.
- Effect of the Naxal ideology on students-youths and their role in spreading the Naxalite movement.
- The movement in Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora.
- Basic conceptual framework for analysing social movements.

The study necessitates a basic understanding on the question of land rights. The dilemmas faced by the Company regarding revenue administration, conditions and experiments leading up to Permanent Settlement, conferment of land ownership rights to the zamindar and its effects are important areas of deliberation for highlighting the central thematic continuity of the study from colonial to post-colonial times. Regarding the perplexing question of landownership, transition in its understanding and differences in perception from the Mughal period to the Company period, the works to which this study is heavily indebted are Irfan Habib’s *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*,³⁸ B.H Baden-Powell’s *The Land Systems of British India*³⁹,

³⁸Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 3rd Edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁹ B.H Baden-Powell (1894, July). “Is The State the Owner of All Land in India”. *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Record*, VIII, nos.15 and 16 (July, 1894): 1-20; B.H Baden- Powell, *The Land Systems of British India*, Vol. I, II &III (London: The Clarendon Press, 1892).

Nathaniel Halhed's *A Memoir on the Land Tenure and Principles of Taxation*⁴⁰ and Walter K. Firminger's *Introduction to the Fifth Report dated 1812*⁴¹. Habibs' work is phenomenal as it provides detailed structure of Mughal land revenue administration. His analysis of the status of the zamindar as a revenue collecting agent in a pyramidal revenue collection mechanism and the absence of land ownership idea helps in understanding the dilemma faced by the British, which in turn is evident from the works of British legal experts and administrators like Baden-Powell and Halhed trying to grasp the land question. *The Fifth Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company*, 1812⁴² and F.D Ascoli's *Early Revenue History of Bengal and the Fifth Report*, 1812⁴³ contain reserve of information on various revenue experiments of the Company. The phenomenal monograph by Ranajit Guha titled, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*⁴⁴ on the intellectual origins of Permanent Settlement, focuses on ideas, thinking and debates by policy makers. This historiographical-analytical work has proven indispensable for unpacking and grasping the effects of Permanent Settlement that altered agrarian relations forever. The thematic continuity of land as an issue can be summed up as a transition from 'land to the zamindar' to the demands for 'land to the tiller' raised by political forces in the 20th century. For a basic understanding of the 'land to the tiller' logic, Ronald J. Herring's work⁴⁵ has proven to be useful in this study.

Given the British tendency of documenting their every move, accompanied with extensive research, there is no dearth of detailed administrative histories of the new country which they sought to grasp, conquer and administer. The sources and historical literature from which we hope to derive our understanding of the early colonial period and resistances, following Ranajit Guha, can be divided into primary, secondary and tertiary discourses. The primary discourse is official in character, which originated in persons directly linked to government like bureaucrats, soldiers and non-officials but linked to the Company like missionaries, traders, landlords and moneylenders among natives. The secondary discourses draw on the primary one

⁴⁰ Nathaniel B. Halhed, *A Memoir on the Land Tenure and Principles of Taxation* (Calcutta: S. Smith & Co., 1832).

⁴¹ Walter K. Firminger, *Introduction to the Fifth Report dated 1812*. (Calcutta: R. Cambray and Co. 1917).

⁴² *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company*, dated 28th of July 1812 was compiled by Samuel Davis and James Cumming and originally published in London.

⁴³ Ananda Bhattacharya, ed., *F.D Ascoli: Early Revenue History of Bengal and the Fifth Report, 1812* (Delhi: Manohar, 2019).

⁴⁴ Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan and Permanent Black in association with Ashoka University, 2016).

⁴⁵ Ronald J. Herring, *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

as material. The primary discourse is written at the time of an event or immediately after it while the secondary one comes later in time and analyses it from outside. The tertiary discourse ranges from liberal to the Left and the Leftist redefinition of voices from below.⁴⁶ The first type of discourse is directly available from the West Bengal State Archives like Home (Political) files of the colonial period and other official correspondences, National Library of India and Bengal District Records like W.K Firminger's *Midnapore District Records (Letters Issued and Letters Received)*⁴⁷ some of which are also available digitally. Various republished compilations of letter correspondences between the Company officials ranging from revenue matters to military expeditions also prove useful in this regard. J.C Price's *Notes on the History of Midnapore*⁴⁸ deserve special mention as it not only contains a brief account of the history of the district and its administrative structure with the Resident at its centre, but also accounts of expeditions into the Junglemahals, settlement of land revenue and commercial matters via official correspondences of the 1770s. Ananda Bhattacharya's compilation consisting of Midnapore District Collectorate Records of the 18th century⁴⁹ is also an asset for accessing primary letter correspondences of the period.

The secondary discourse on the period includes a lot of significant works. W.W Hunter's series named '*A Statistical Account of Bengal*' is a reserve of first-hand information on the districts of that period. Volume III of this series⁵⁰ deals with Midnapore providing detailed account of its geography, people, agriculture, natural calamities, climate, rainfall, commerce and communication, administration as well as medicinal aspects. A.K Jameson's report on survey and settlement operations⁵¹ also shed light on various issues of the district during the colonial period. This report is important for this study due to its detailed analysis of *paikan* tenures as well as *sanja* mode of sharecropping cultivation in the district. W.W Hunter's *The Annals of*

⁴⁶ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", in *Subaltern studies II- Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 2-8.

⁴⁷ W.K Firminger. (ed.). *Midnapore District Records (Letters Issued and Letters Received)* Vols. I-IV, (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1914-15), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.143307/mode/1up>.

⁴⁸ J.C Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore as Contained in Records Extant in the Collector's Office*, Reprint, Vol 1 (Hansebooks, 2020). First published in 1876 by The Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta.

⁴⁹ Ananda Bhattacharya, ed., *Adivasi resistance in Early Colonial India: Comprising the Chuar Rebellion of 1799 by J.C Price and Relevant Midnapore District Collectorate Records from the Eighteenth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2017).

⁵⁰ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: District of Midnapur and Hugli (including Howrah)*, Vol.3, Reprint (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 5. First published in 1876 by Trubner and Co., London.

⁵¹ A.K Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore, 1911-1917* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1922).

*Rural Bengal*⁵², contributions by civil servants like L.S.S O Malley in the *Bengal District Gazetteers*⁵³ and H.V Bayley's famous work *Memoranda of Midnapore*⁵⁴ helps in understanding the context of the Chuar resistances. Hunter's 1868 work seeks to provide a comprehensive history of lower Bengal which includes discussions on the state of the country as it passed under British rule, ethnical elements of populations, Company's attempts at rural administration and manufacturing and the overall effects of Company experiments. O'Malley's gazetteer on Midnapore outlines in details various aspects of the district ranging from geography, history, people, general and land revenue administration, rents, wages and prices to agriculture, health, calamities, communication, education etc. Comprehensive history of Midnapore has been accessed from H. V Bayley's work as well as L.S. S O' Malley's 1925 work, *History of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa under British Rule*⁵⁵. Works in vernaculars have also proven to be of great help in this study. Two notable works in this regard are Jogesh Chandra Basu's *Medinipurer Itihas*⁵⁶ and Kamal Chaudhury's *Medinipurer Itihas*⁵⁷. Both these works trace the history of the district from the pre – Mughal period with descriptive accounts on its geographical location along with features like soils, river systems etc. Demographic descriptions, caste configurations, accounts of the various zamindari lineages along with references of the district in literature and role in social reform contribute to an enriched understanding of the district. Syed Rashed Ali's work on the land revenue administration in Midnapore from 1760 to 1885 focuses on in-depth interaction between district administration and the Midnapore zamindars on one hand and raiyats on the other, both pre and post-Permanent Settlement periods.⁵⁸ As the main focus of the study has been the Chuar resistances, the only comprehensive colonial account available in this regard is J.C Price's monograph titled *The Chuar Rebellion of 1799*.⁵⁹ This is a straightforward historical account of the second phase of the Chuar rebellion by the Settlement Officer, J.C Price and hence forms an informative reference point for understanding the course of events. References to the Chuar rebellion are

⁵² W.W Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, Volume I, Reprint (Alpha Editions, 2019). First edition Published in 1868 by Leypoldt and Holt, New York.

⁵³ L.S.S O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers- Midnapore*, Reprint (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2018), 1-2. First published in 1911.

⁵⁴ H.V Bayley, *Memoranda of Midnapore, 1852*, Reprint (Medinipur: Medinipur Itihas Rachana Samity, 1988).

⁵⁵ L.S.S O'Malley, *History of Bengal Bihar and Orissa* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1925).

⁵⁶ Jogesh Chandra Basu, *Medinipurer Itihas* (Kolkata: Annapurna Prakashani, BS 1426/ 2019).

⁵⁷ Kamal Chaudhuri, *Medinipurer Itihas*, Vol I & II (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, B.S 1420/ 2013).

⁵⁸ Syed Rashed Ali, *Midnapore District: Company, Raiyats and Zamindars 1760-1885* (Kolkata: K.P Bagchi and Company, 2008).

⁵⁹ J.C Price, *The Chuar Rebellion of 1799* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariate Press, 1874).

available in the district gazetteers and the vernacular literature, though all are historical, descriptive, short accounts of the main trajectory of events. The first phase of the rebellion, associated with armed pacification of the zamindaris of Junglemahals, can be noted from the letter correspondences. For the second phase, apart from Price's account Raja Mohendra Lal Khan's, *The History of the Midnapur Raj*⁶⁰ proves to be a valuable source. Other works include Madhup De's *Rajdrohi Rani Shiromani*⁶¹ and Binod S. Das's chapter in Chittabrata Palit's work, *Agrarian Bengal under the Raj*.⁶²

The tertiary discourse on the colonial period is a recent development. All the previous accounts have been historical-descriptive and did not tend to sociological questions regarding the nature of the state they created or the society they disrupted or transformed. As Kaviraj notes, there are accounts of popular disturbances, 'disapprovingly or lovingly' told but until recently attempts were not made to uncover the structure of popular discourse.⁶³ Works like those of Suprakash Ray, as redefining the voice from below are of special importance. As Ray commented in his work on peasant resistances, Indian civilisation and Indian history writing exercise has not recognised the history of the common people. The colonial history writing which followed the Muslim period also suppressed the history of the commons. Ray states that from ancient times until the 19th century, the history of the common peasant has been a history of class struggle against landed classes and imperialist forces.⁶⁴ Subaltern studies tried to provide detailed historical accounts of popular resistance and also analyse structure and uncover sociological narratives of popular discourse that has proven to be especially important in this study. One such instance is Swapan Dasgupta's essay, 'Adivasi Politics in Midnapur' in *Subaltern Studies IV*⁶⁵.

The tracing of thematic continuity from the period of the Chuar resistances to the Naxalite resistance in Midnapore, necessitated intense deliberations on the evolution of the agrarian structure post Permanent Settlement, the changing configurations of the exploiter-exploited classes, the political forces as they evolved in the 20th century – especially the Congress, CPI,

⁶⁰ Rajah Mohendro Lal Khan, Zemindar of Midnapore and Narajole, *The History of the Midnapore Raj* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1889).

⁶¹ Madhup De, *Rajdrohi Rani Shiromani* (Medinipur: Boipattar, 2022).

⁶² Binod S. Das, "Chuar Revolt in the Frontier Bengal 1760-1833", in *Agrarian Bengal under the Raj*, ed. Chittabrata Palit (Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2012).

⁶³ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India*, 45.

⁶⁴ Suprakash Ray, *Bharater Krishak Bidraha o Ganatantrik Sangram* (Kolkata: Radical, 2012).

⁶⁵ Swapan Dasgupta, "Adivasi Politics in Midnapur", in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed., Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Congress Socialist Party and the various front organizations of these parties. For understanding the evolving nature of agrarian system, a plethora of literature is available and this study is indebted to the work of authors like Ratnalekha Ray⁶⁶, Rajat Kanta Ray⁶⁷, Sugata Bose⁶⁸, Andre Beteille⁶⁹, P.K Mukherjee⁷⁰, Chitta Panda⁷¹, Sirajul Islam⁷², B.B Chaudhuri⁷³ and Partha Chatterjee⁷⁴ to name a few prominent ones. Direct government reports like Report of the Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee⁷⁵, Report of the Land Revenue Commission⁷⁶ also have accounts of issues like land alienation and rural indebtedness that plagued the lives of the rural poor. The birth of any political party and the strategy that it frames for itself, requires understanding of the socio-political environment along with its dominant actors, which the new party needs to contend with. The policies of the Communist Party of India in its initial phases cannot be grasped without reference to the Communist International policy stance and directives and the latter is extensively available across digital archives.⁷⁷ The literature on the rise of the CPI, its dilemma and equations with other actors is vast but this study heavily relies on some prominent ones like those of Overstreet and Windmiller⁷⁸, Sobhanlal Datta Gupta⁷⁹,

⁶⁶ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, 1760-1850* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979).

⁶⁷ Rajat. K. Ray, R., & Ratna, Ray, "Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal". *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no.1 (1975): 81-102.

⁶⁸ Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁶⁹ Andre Beteille, *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁷⁰ P.K Mukherjee, *Land Problems in India* (London: Longmans, Green and Co.,1933).

⁷¹ Chitta Panda, *The Decline of Bengal Zamindars: Midnapore (1870-1920)* (Delhi: Oxford University Press,1996).

⁷² Sirajul Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure: The Origin and Growth of Intermediate Interests in the 19th Century* (Calcutta: K.P Bagchi and Company, 1988).

⁷³ B.B Chaudhuri, "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar 1885-1947", *Indian Historical Review* 1 (July 1975):105-65.

⁷⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947 – The Land Question* (Calcutta: KP Bagchi and Company, 1984).

⁷⁵ Government of Bengal, *Report of the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Bengal Government Press,1930).

⁷⁶ Government of Bengal, *Report of the Land Revenue Commission*, Vols 1-VI (Alipore: Bengal Government Press,1940).

⁷⁷ For instance, V.I Lenin, "Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions For The Second Congress Of The Communist International" in Lenin's Collected Works, Vol.31, trans. Julius Katzer, 2nd English Edition (Moscow: Progress Publishers,1965), 144-151, accessed December 15, 2023,

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm> .

⁷⁸ Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959).

⁷⁹ Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India 1919-1943: Dialectics of Real and a Possible History* (Kolkata: Seribaan, 2006).

John Patrick Haithcox⁸⁰, Jayprakash Narayan⁸¹ and Marcus F. Franda⁸². Overstreet and Windmiller's work comprehensively covers the contextual rise of the communist forces in India along with ideological dilemmas and party organisational structure. Datta Gupta and Haithcox's work provide detailed analysis of the rise of CPI and its relation to the Comintern along with its ensuing dilemmas. Franda's work is helpful in creating an understanding of the political scenario of Bengal in the decades of turmoil and it includes detailed account of the context of the Naxalbari uprising.

Both the Congress and CPI being well documented parties, direct party documents are also indispensable for any study like *Draft Platform of Action of the CPI* (1930), *Draft Political Theses of the CPI* (1934), *On the Agrarian Question in India* (1949), *Political Thesis of the Communist Party of India* (1948), *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* (INC, 1949), *On the Results of the General Elections and the Tasks before the Party* (CPI, 1952) etc. The rise of the CPI and its front organizations like All India Kisan Sabha, led to mobilisation culminating in the Tebhaga movement. The works of Abdullah Rasul⁸³, Sunil Kumar Sen⁸⁴, D.N Dhanagare⁸⁵, Asok Majumdar⁸⁶ have been important sources in this regard.

Moving on to the revolutionary legacy of Midnapore in the 20th century, administrative letter correspondences from the West Bengal State Archives and direct compilations by activists like Satish Chandra Samanta⁸⁷ and others, reminisces by relatives of rebels like Biplab Maji (son of Bimala Maji)⁸⁸ prove to be valuable sources. Works of scholars like Swapna Dasgupta⁸⁹ and

⁸⁰ John Patrick Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy 1920-1939* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971).

⁸¹ Jayprakash Narayan, *Why Socialism* (Benares: All India Congress Socialist Party, 1936); Jayprakash Narayan, *Socialist Unity and the Congress Socialist Party* (Bombay: The Congress Socialist Party, 1941).

⁸² Marcus F. Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1971); Marcus F. Franda, 1968, *West Bengal and the Federalising Process in India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁸³ M. Abdulla Rasul, *Krishak Sabhar Itihas* (Calcutta: Nabajatak Prakashan, BS1376/ 1969-70); M. Abdullah Rasul, *Tebhaga Struggle of Bengal*, pamphlet (Delhi: All India Kisan Sabha pamphlet, March 1986).

⁸⁴ S.K Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47* (New Delhi: People's Publishing house, 1972).

⁸⁵ D.N Dhanagare, "Peasant Protest and Politics: The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal (India), 1946-47", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 3, no.3 (1976) :360-378.

⁸⁶ Asok Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal 1946-1950* (Delhi: Aakar, 2011).

⁸⁷ Satish Chandra Samanta, Shyamadas Bhattacharya, Prahlad Kumar Pramanick, Ananda Mohan Das, *August Revolution and Two years National Government in Midnapore, Part I, Tamluk* (Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1946).

⁸⁸ Biplab Maji and Mukti Mukhopadhyay, eds., *Tebhagar Agnikanya: Bimala Maji* (Howrah: Sahajpath, 2017).

⁸⁹ Swapna Dasgupta, "Local Politics in Bengal: Midnapur District 1907-1934" (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1980).

Bidyut Chakraborty⁹⁰ on Midnapore, Tanika Sarkar⁹¹ along with a host of writers in vernacular prove indispensable in understanding the resistance dynamics of the district.

Understanding the Naxalite movement involves internalising the conditions and the context in which it was born. This necessitates an overview of the condition of Bengal during the 1950s and 1960s which led to massive radicalisation of the popular mood. Objective conditions like economic crisis, political crisis and most importantly the sense of deprivation, frustration, anger, hatred triggered by starvation needs to be highlighted to understand the Naxalite decade. Literature on this theme tend to focus on the various movements in urban Bengal like refugees, tram fare hike, teachers and students and most importantly food crisis while the focus in rural Bengal is on land reform and redistribution. The works that prove phenomenal in this regard are those of Ranabir Samaddar⁹², Sumanta Banerjee⁹³, Suranjan Das and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay⁹⁴, Francine Frankel⁹⁵ and Wolf Ladejinsky⁹⁶ to name a few.

The reserve of literature on the Naxalite movement is huge. The direct source from which one can derive an understanding of the ideologies and policy stances of the leaders as well as description and analysis of events are the party organs of CPI M-L, *Liberation* and *Deshabrati*. In this regard, two compilations – one by Samar Sen, Debabrata Panda and Ashish Lahiri⁹⁷ and the other by Suniti Kumar Ghosh⁹⁸ - are an asset to anyone seeking to study the Naxalite movement. Writings of the ideologue of the Naxal movement, Charu Mazumdar, are also available in other English and Bengali compilations⁹⁹, apart from the anthologies mentioned

⁹⁰ Bidyut Chakraborty, “Masses in The Anti-British Struggle: The Civil Disobedience Movement in Midnapur, 1930–4”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 19, no.2 (1996): 85-104; Bidyut Chakraborty, “Political Mobilization in the Localities: The 1942 Quit India Movement in Midnapur”, *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 4 (Oct., 1992): 791-814.

⁹¹ Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁹² Ranabir Samaddar ed., *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2018).

⁹³ Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984).

⁹⁴ Suranjan Das and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay, eds., *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting A Turning Point in The History of West Bengal* (Kolkata: K P Bagchi, 2004).

⁹⁵ Francine Frankel, *India's Political Economy 1947-77: The Gradual Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁹⁶ Wolf Ladejinsky, “Land Ceilings and Land Reform”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, no. 5/7 (February, 1972):401-408.

⁹⁷ Samar Sen, Debabrata Panda, Ashish Lahiri, eds., *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol I & II (Calcutta: Kathashilpa, 1978).

⁹⁸ Suniti Kumar Ghosh, *The Historic Turning Point: A Liberation Anthology*, Vol. I & II (Calcutta: 1993).

⁹⁹ Basu Acharya, ed., *Charu Mazumdar, Collected Works*, Vol. I & II (Kolkata: Radical Impression, 2012). Charu Mazumdar's Documents are also available online at <https://archive.org/details/charu-mazumdar-historic-eight->

above. Apart from Sumanta Banerjee's work, accounts of the movement by Suniti Kumar Ghosh¹⁰⁰, Amar Bhattacharya¹⁰¹, Amiya K. Samanta¹⁰², Arun Prosad Mukherjee¹⁰³, K. Satyanarayana¹⁰⁴ and analysis by scholars like Marius Damas¹⁰⁵, Bernard D' Mello¹⁰⁶ and Pradip Basu¹⁰⁷ help in gaining an all-round understanding of the trajectory of events.

One important feature of agitations in post-colonial setting was the involvement and enthusiasm of the youth which achieved a special dimension during the turbulent 1960s. Disillusionment and anti-establishment attitude, compounded by the shattering of expectations reaching its peak with the food movement saw intense radicalisation among the youth. Without an account of the student-youth activism, the spread of Naxalite upsurge in Midnapore cannot be grasped. The best available compilation in this regard is the *Anustup* series on the 1970s edited by Anil Acharya. Volume III titled *Shhat -Shattarer Chhatro Andolan* (The Student Movement in Bengal during 60s and 70s)¹⁰⁸, is an amazing compilation with articles by Ashim Chatterjee, Saibal Mitra, Dipanjan Roychowdhury, Ranabir Samaddar, Nirmal Brahmachari and other reputed student activists of that period. Ranabir Samaddar has also written extensively on the Naxalite decade and the student activism in College Street surrounding the Presidency College¹⁰⁹.

The study of Naxalite upsurge in Midnapore borrows heavily from memoirs. English version sources of this section are also limited. Short accounts of the Midnapore uprising are present in the works of Sumanta Banerjee, Amar Bhattacharya, Suniti Kumar Ghosh and Edward

documents ; Bengali version can be accessed from *Charu Majumdar Rachanasangraha* (Kolkata: New Horizon Book Trust, 2001).

¹⁰⁰ Suniti Kumar Ghosh, *Naxalbari Before and After: Reminiscences and Appraisal* (Kolkata: New Age, 2009).

¹⁰¹ Amar Bhattacharya, *Revolution Unleashed: A History of Naxalbari Movement in India 1964 to 1972* (Kolkata: Sampark, 2007); Amar Bhattacharya, *Naxalbari Andoloner Pramanya Tathya Sankalan*, 1st Edition, (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2013).

¹⁰² Amiya Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics in West Bengal: An Experiment in Armed Agrarian Struggle* (Calcutta: Firma K.L Mukhopadhyay Pvt. Ltd, 1984).

¹⁰³ Arun Prosad Mukherjee, *Maoist 'Spring Thunder': The Naxalite Movement (1967-1972)* (Kolkata: K.P Bagchi & Company, 2007).

¹⁰⁴ K. Satyanarayana, *Naxalism and Society* (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers & Distributors, 2021).

¹⁰⁵ Marius Damas, *Approaching Naxalbari* (Calcutta: Radical Impression, 1991).

¹⁰⁶ Bernard D' Mello, *India after Naxalbari: Unfinished History* (Delhi: Aakar, 2018).

¹⁰⁷ Pradip Basu, ed., *Naxalite Politics: Post-Structuralist, Postcolonial and Subaltern Perspectives* (Calcutta: Setu Prakashani, 2017).

¹⁰⁸ Anil Acharya (ed.), *Sattar Dashak: Shhat- Sattarer Chhatro Andolan/ The Student Movement in Bengal during 60s and 70s* (Kolkata: Anushtup, 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Ranbir Samaddar, "Occupy College Street: Student Radicalism in Kolkata in the Sixties", *Slavic Review*, 77, no.4 (2018): 904-911.

Duyker¹¹⁰. Moderately detailed analysis is available in Anwesha Sengupta's essay in Ranabir Samaddar's compilation¹¹¹ and Amiya K. Samanta's *Left Extremist Politics in West Bengal: An Experiment in Armed Agrarian Struggle*. Given the controversial nature of the period, archives in many cases are either silent or not easily accessible. In such case memoirs of the activists fill the gap created due to silence of the archives. The memoirs of Santosh Rana¹¹² and Ashim Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee)¹¹³, both in Bengali, have resulted in resurgence of interest in the Naxal period of Midnapore by providing not only descriptive accounts of different phases of the movement but also analysing the achievements and shortfalls. A Bengali magazine named *Ebong Jalarka* published a series of volumes on Charu Mazumdar, out of which Series 11¹¹⁴ has exclusively focused on Naxal movement in Midnapore. It compiled *Deshabrat* articles on Midnapore and also conducted interviews with all the leading Naxal activists of the period like Bhabadeb Mandal, Gunadhar Murmu, Nitai Das, Shakti Mondal, Dilip Sarkar, Ranabir Samaddar, Santosh Rana, Ashim Chatterjee, Ashok Sengupta, Pradip Banerjee, Susanta Jha, Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, Piyasha Dasgupta, Mihir Rana, Leba Tudu and Dipanjan Roychowdhury to name a few. In addition to this, one compilation by Ashim Chatterjee contains two documents of the Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border Regional Organizing Committee.¹¹⁵ Analytical essays by rebel leaders like Bhabadeb Mandal and Gunadhar Murmu¹¹⁶ in compilations on the Communist movement in India are also another source of information for this period.

Apart from all the literature sources mentioned above, the newspapers of the period like *The Statesman*, *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Amritabazar Patrika*, *Jugantar* etc are a treasure trove in the form of information in the news section and analysis in the editorial section.

Social movements are principal modes of action primarily outside institutional channels by which any collectivity voices their grievances and demands. Literature on social movements is

¹¹⁰ Edward Duyker, *Tribal Guerillas: The Santals of West Bengal and the Naxalite Movement* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹¹¹ Anwesha Sengupta, "The Prairie Fire Spreads I: Medinipur", in Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2018).

¹¹² Santosh Rana, *Rajnitir Ek Jiban* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2017).

¹¹³ Ashim Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2022).

¹¹⁴ *Ebong Jalarka*, "Charu Mazumdar Series 11", XVII, no. 3 & 4 (October 2014-March 2015).

¹¹⁵ Ashim Chattopadhyay, ed., *Aguner Barnamalay: Pnach Doshoker Jatrath* (Kolkata: Akhor, 2021).

¹¹⁶ Gunadhar Murmu, Bhabadeb Mandal, "An Analysis of the Debra Peasant Movement", in *Historical and Polemical Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, (1964-72), Vol. II (Vijaywada: Tarimela Nagi Reddy Memorial Trust, 2008).

extensive and increasing interest in this field is adding to the already huge reserve. The analysis section in this study heavily borrows from the works of scholars like Ranajit Guha ¹¹⁷, Eric Hobsbawm ¹¹⁸, Charles Tilly ¹¹⁹, Ted Gurr ¹²⁰, Neil. J Smelser ¹²¹, Partha Chatterjee ¹²² and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya ¹²³ to name the primary ones. These theoretical formulations are useful in establishing linkages and uncovering convergences and divergences regarding circumstances, causes and strategies between the two movements separated by centuries.

Statement of the Problem and Research Agenda

The central agenda of the study is to examine the interconnectedness of two armed resistances separated in timeline by centuries in a frontier district of Bengal. This is a micro level study of a district which has had a legacy of radical resistance from pre-colonial to post-colonial times. Modern studies, to be successful, need to be rooted in solid long term historical understanding. Neither the late 1960s Naxalite upsurge in the district nor the ultra-leftist Maoist phase of the 21st century, causally and circumstantially spring from a vacuum. Hence, exploration of the long historical lineage which in turn constitutes popular memory of the area becomes important. Inclusion of the Chuar rebellion in this study serves this purpose.

It can be noted in this context that the major mainstream accounts of resistances in the early colonial period tends to leave out this phase. Even Ranajit Guha's seminal work on peasant insurgencies in colonial India leaves out the first thirty years from analysis. He bases all of his examples on the Narkelberia rebellion led by Titu Mir, the Birsaites *Ulgulan* or the Santal *Hul*. However, he does concede that even though consciousness was in a naive form throughout the first three quarters of the peasant movements, its existence must be acknowledged.¹²⁴ As

¹¹⁷ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

¹¹⁸ E.J Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels; Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959); E.J Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

¹¹⁹ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978).

¹²⁰ Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

¹²¹ Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

¹²² Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹²³ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹²⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 5-8.

students of history, we learn that the first war of Indian independence or the first major resistance against the Company was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It is only in the recent years we find the pre- Mutiny period coming into focus but even here the narratives of resistances are dominated by the hegemonic ones like the Santal *Hul*. This study tries to address this gap by attempting to create a framework for thematically, strategically and geographically linking the Chuar rebellion to the modern-day resistances in the district. We can note that modern movements require their exercise of consciousness creation and mobilisation. Masses even in modern times are docile. References to a glorious past of resistance is a fruitful mobilization tactic, as it appeals to sentiments. Any reference to Midnapore today in political propaganda or otherwise tends to focus on its revolutionary potential and legacy. Chuar rebellion is invariably a part of that legacy just like the nationalist, Naxalite and Maoist phases.

The study also aims to dispel the notion of interlinkages between idea of modernity and rationality and how it is erroneous to dub such resistances as pure pre-political, pre-modern banditry, even though Hobsbawm's categorisation of Chuar rebellion indicates in that direction.¹²⁵

The next important theme explored in the study is the impact of early colonial state making and the continuities of its effects in the post-colonial setting. The role of colonial statecraft in the initial stage has been maximisation of revenue for which they had sought to define land proprietorship, resulting in a plethora of effects on different sections of Indian society. Land rights and land use privileges thus become the common mobilisation point of the Chuar rebellion and the Naxalite upsurge. Hence, divided by centuries and united by issues and strategies can be stated to be the defining tagline of this study.

Another area in which this study seeks to contribute is related to a detailed descriptive-analytical account of the Naxalite upsurge in Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora. From the literature review section, it is already evident that accounts of the uprising in existing literature is inadequate. Even Anwesha Sengupta in her essay in Ranabir Samaddar's editorial volume mentions the gap in the following words,

¹²⁵ E.J Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels; Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), 23.

Besides Santosh Rana's memoir and the partial account by Leba Tudu, and two unpublished internal reports (now untraceable) there is no political or reminiscing account of the peasant struggle in Medinipur in 1967-71... We have only one political report of the party committee published in *Deshabrati* and *Liberation* ...the urban activists who went to Medinipur to organize the struggle there did not write anything- analytical or descriptive. Peasant activists rarely write... if the activists and leaders of the struggle with the time remaining decide to write (for some have died by now), or undertake a collective enquiry (in the form of a history workshop) into the years when history was being made in Medinipur, we shall have a clearer idea of many of the remarkable aspects of the struggle.¹²⁶

Fortunately, the two untraceable internal documents of the Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border Regional Committee have been republished by Ashim Chatterjee in Bengali in 2021. He also wrote his own memoir titled *Naxalbarinama* (which initially was published as a series in *Desh* magazine and in 2022 by Ananda Publishers as a book), which added vigour to the deliberations set in motion earlier by publication of Rana's *Rajniti* in 2017. The study also intends to uncover parallel narratives of the movement by interviewing activists like Prithwiranjan Dasgupta (Meghnad), Mihir Rana, Ranabir Samaddar, Shipra Rana and Piyasa Dasgupta who have not yet written extensive personal memoirs. As these memoirs, interviews conducted by local magazines like *Ebong Jalarka* and by the author of this study along with available articles in *Deshabrati* are in Bengali, the national reach of these accounts and analysis are limited. This study, hence, seeks to integrate all these vernacular narratives with the existing national outreach literature of the movement and contextualise them using databases like Census reports of the period. Such an approach is aimed towards comprehensive analysis of the trajectory of the resistance keeping in mind regional profiles of the areas like topography, land use patterns, caste and class configurations, socio-economic conditions and nature of participation and inter-regional connections along with convergences and divergences in strategies. It can be safely asserted that similar analysis of the area in this period has not been attempted in the existing literature on the subject.

Any study on resistance is incomplete without an attempt to locate it theoretically and conceptually within the available analytical framework on social movements encompassing sociology, social anthropology, psychology and politics. Regarding theoretical analysis, the approach taken here is inductive. Though Chuar rebellion is temporally located much before the modern literature on social movements, this study attempts to analyse it using the causation-mobilisation-organisation analytical models of modern theories. As the study seeks to connect

¹²⁶ Anwesha Sengupta, "The Prairie Fire Spreads I: Medinipur", in *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, ed., Ranabir Samaddar (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2018), 199-200.

the two movements, causally and strategically, a basic comparative analysis of the two movements has been attempted. For analysing causality, the study hinges on Ted Gurr's relative deprivation theory and Neil J. Smelser's structural strain theory and for understanding mobilisation-organisation dynamics, use of Charles Tilly's mobilisation model comes as a natural choice. Also given the nature of the movements, highlighting the emotional-sentimental quotient is imperative apart from the social-economic-scientific models and hence in the theoretical section, this study also aims at highlighting the types of human emotions and their role in determining the trajectories of the movements.

Research Questions

In the context of the main theme of research i.e. land and resistance, the following main question can be raised,

- Can land rights be considered as the singular theme that links centuries of agrarian history and resistance together in Bengal – From Chuar Rebellion to Naxalbari?

In the context of the Chuar rebellion, the questions that arise are as follows,

- In what ways can the Chuar rebellion of Midnapore be categorised as the first anti-colonial resistance related to land rights and privileges?
- Can the revolutionary legacy of Chuar rebellion in Midnapore be considered a precursor to modern political consciousness and resistances in the district?

Regarding the post-colonial agrarian setting and the Naxalite uprising in Midnapore, the queries that can be raised are,

- How does the agrarian question, nature of exploitation as a result of colonial policies related to land and the revolutionary legacy of Midnapore maintain a continuity from the colonial to the post-colonial times through the nationalist movements and Tebhaga?
- What was the nature of effect that Naxalbari uprising had on the district and was the effect locally generated or imported from the urban centres like Calcutta via the students-youths and how is the student activism of College Street area focusing on Presidency College directly linked to the Midnapore upsurge of 1968-71?
- What was the nature of the upsurge, the issues raised, outcome and extent of success of the upsurge?

- Did the movement create a sense of ‘agency’ in the grassroot section in the district and did the peasant become a ‘political subject’ himself or remained just a means in the urban educated middle-class project, who armed with the Left ideology in one hand and gun in the other, sought to ‘liberate’ the rural exploited?

Regarding continuities in nature of resistances, the questions that can be posed are,

- To what extent do the ‘frontier’ characteristics of the district- geographical, economic and demographic- appear to be a continuous feature affecting resistances from early colonial to post-colonial period?
- Using the prominent theoretical strands regarding causation, mobilisation and organisation of social movements, how can we analyse the two resistances chosen for this study?

Research Methods

In terms of research purpose, a major part of this study has been exploratory- descriptive in nature where certain situations and events have been described in detail, in an attempt to develop in-depth understanding and setting the context for studying and analysing the resistances. Such account had set into perspective the feasibility of conducting the study and outlining the research methods. The explanation type used in the study is idiographic, as an exhaustive understanding of the situation and causes leading to events in two cases, the Chuar rebellion and the Naxalite upsurge in post-colonial Midnapore, has been sought. Explanations offered across archival sources as well as by the actors themselves have been used and different explanations of similar situations compared. This brings us to the comparative and historical method of research which has been used to provide historically grounded explanations of the important events and their outcomes. Regarding time dimension of the research, the nature of the study is cross-sectional as it involves observation of cross-section of a phenomenon at one point of time and a cross case-oriented analysis, where two cases of resistance separated by two centuries has been studied in details, in an attempt to understand continuities regarding the singular theme of land rights and strategies of resistance. The nature of evaluation of this study is qualitative focusing on causes, trajectory and outcome. For quantitative corroboration of descriptive accounts and evaluation outcome, existing data analysis has been used like Census reports of Government of India and data available from newspaper reports.

Life story research has been a central method in this study which enriches the primary data reserve of this study. While studying the Naxalite upsurge period, the units of study are individuals who have directly been participants in the movement though few in number. Autobiographies, memoirs, qualitative interviews and oral history have been the main tools of life story research in this study. Such study has helped in developing a relationship between self and social context of the respondent by putting their lived experiences and memory at the centre. In- depth interviews with individual participants have been conducted. Interviews with those participants who did not write memoirs enter the genre of oral history. It is generally termed as recovery history based on life review of the subject. The nature of the interviews has been open ended and conversational- participatory in nature. Given the age of certain participants, the nature of interviews in this biographical-interpretive method, in the first instance, has been attempts to obtain a life history in the literal sense of the term seeking response to questions like, 'Please tell me your life story' and then following up with further interviews to highlight and uncover certain aspects of narrative suited to the focus of research and its questions. Problems with memory are an issue on which debates exist. Eric Hobsbawm criticised this on grounds of 'slipperiness of memory'.¹²⁷ Defenders like Trevor Lummis argues that while short term memory declines with age, long term memory is not impaired and can improve as well.¹²⁸ While conducting interviews, it is true that accounts were not systematic and the respondents tended to deviate a lot, as they recalled incidents in bits and pieces scattered across timeline. Sometimes dates of events did not match. To offset this handicap, triangulation technique to test validity, by comparing accounts of other oral interviewees, memoirs or documentary evidence like newspaper reports etc. has been fruitful. While using this method certain considerations have been kept in mind like accounts of the past are not pure recalls, that memory interacts with experience and ideological inclinations of the present affect retrospective account for an event. Two autobiographies have been used extensively in the study in which self-disclosures by the author were helpful in interpretation of how the author as an individual can be located within a particular context. It is the most individualistic of any literary genre but given the nature of the period under study, even such individual accounts can shed light on the mindset of similar age groups of the period. The problem with autobiography is that the motivation of self-justification can dominate but this can be balanced by other parallel accounts. Content analysis of interviews conducted by third parties of other participants

¹²⁷ E.J Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997), 206.

¹²⁸ Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 118.

who were not personally accessible has been used as a tool to supplement accounts received from interviews and memoirs.

Humans in society possess considerable free choice and agency but are also controlled by environmental forces and factors. This is true in regard to the impact that Naxal ideology as espoused by its popular ideologue Charu Mazumdar had on the youth. The ideology at that time became the dominant discourse. Discourse is understood to be a particular knowledge system of the world that shapes how the world is understood and how things are done based on it. A powerful discourse can push subjects to particular ways of thinking and acting. Understanding the Naxal ideology thus falls within the purview of discourse analysis. Hence extensive quotes from his works have been used to grasp its impact. Language has been an issue as the essence of the writings in Bengali is much more radically appealing than its English counterpart.

In course of research a combination of primary and secondary sources has been used. The research of the colonial period is heavily dependent on archives as available in the West Bengal State Archives and The National Library of India. It includes administrative letter correspondences, policy documents, departmental reports like those of Home (Political) and accounts by administrators themselves writing retrospectively on the period and events. The archival sources that have been of great assistance in the accounts of the 20th century are newspapers of those periods the primary ones being *Anandabazar Patrika* (Bengali), *Amritabazar Patrika* (English), *The Statesman* (English) and *Jugantar* (Bengali). Primary resources also include Census and other government reports, survey and settlement records, compilation of Party documents and district gazetteers.

An Overview of the Chapters

The chapter division of the study is thematic in nature and each chapter combines descriptive narratives with theoretical analysis. The entire study has been divided into six chapters.

Chapter 1 forms the *Introduction* to the thesis. The main focus of the first part of the discussion here has been the question of land rights and landownership and how Company experiments in state making and revenue administration altered the traditional and customary understanding of property rights in land, the effect of which was to last centuries. The choice of Midnapore as the area of study has been rationalised in this thematic context. The chapter incorporates a

detailed thematic literature review, an overview of the research agenda, research questions and methods and ends with an overview of the different chapters in this study.

Chapter 2 is titled *Colonial State Making, 'Land to the Zamindar' and the Chuar Rebellion of Midnapore*. In this chapter attempt has been made to pen down a short general history of the district and map the territory of the district, focusing mainly on its frontier nature which affects its demography and culture. Without this, it will be impossible to grasp the resistances not just of the colonial times but also the post-colonial one as well, because the areas covered by the accounts are spread out mainly in the tri-junction of the modern states of Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand. Different types of land tenures prevalent in the district has also been outlined. The first phase of the Chuar rebellion has been discussed as a reaction to the imposition of formal revenue administration in areas not covered by it during the Mughal times, while the second phase in terms of reaction to the effects of Permanent Settlement. In the final section attempt has been made to analyse the nature of the rebellion in the light of Eric Hobsbawm's concept of banditry and social banditry, Ranajit Guha's analysis on features of peasant insurgency in colonial India and Sudipta Kaviraj's concept of fuzzy and enumerated communities.

Chapter 3 is titled *Agrarian Setting of 20th Century Bengal (1900s-1940s): An Overview of the Rise of the Left, the Road to Tebhaga and the 'Land to the Tiller' logic*. The first part of the discussion highlights the issue of land rights and effects of Permanent Settlement as the single biggest continuity from the colonial to the post-colonial times. It explicitly deals with decline of zamindars and rise of jotedars as a class who along with the moneylenders is cemented as the exploiter class in the agrarian scene of Bengal. Special focus has been placed in providing an overview of the different facets of exploitation and hardships faced by the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. The second part of the chapter deals with the rise of the Communist Party of India in the prevailing circumstances, keeping in mind other dominant political forces of the time like the Indian National Congress and the comparison of policy stance on the agrarian question between them. This is followed by a short account of the Tebhaga movement, creating the backdrop for the future resistances. A brief overview of the revolutionary legacy of Midnapore, spanning the time period 1900 to 1940s has also been provided. In the final section, attempt has been made to reason out the rise of the Left forces at the cost of the Congress using Partha Chatterjee's concept of 'political society' and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya's concept of 'party society'.

Chapter 4 is titled *Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s: An Overview of the Revolutionary Situation and its Impact on the Students-Youths*. As the title implies, the first part of discussion here is about the socio- economic situation of Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s and how reactions to the situation led to radicalisation of the public mood both in urban and rural settings, culminating in the Naxalbari incident of May, 1967. Special focus has been placed on the birth of CPI (M-L) and Naxal ideology as espoused by Charu Mazumdar, as without it the impact on students and youths cannot be understood in the given volatile context of the decades of turmoil. The chapter has a special section devoted to the student- youth movement in Calcutta surrounding the Presidency College and Presidency Consolidation, as without it the account on the spread of Naxalite upsurge in Midnapore cannot be explained and analysed.

Chapter 5 is titled *The Naxalite Uprising in Midnapore and Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border: Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora*. The exclusive focus here is on the trajectory of the Naxalite upsurge in the areas. It seeks to comparatively assess the regional profiles of the areas focusing on topography and population along with the nature of land and agriculture, using Census data of the period. Special focus has been placed on the different phases of the upsurge in this region, borrowing heavily from memoirs and interviews of leaders, newspaper reports and articles in the party organs *Liberation* and *Deshabrati*. Different phases of the upsurge from 1968 to 1971 have been discussed in detail starting from mobilisation of people to the repression of the movement. In the last section attempt has been made to provide an analytical account of the upsurge drawing from various reports and accounts of the leaders themselves.

Chapter 6 forms the *Conclusion* to the thesis. The main crux of the discussion here is summarising the research in the light of the research questions raised in the introduction. A basic analysis of the two movements based on prominent theoretical strands of causation, mobilisation and organisation of social movements has been attempted. It also seeks to note the fulfilment of goals raised in the research agenda, shortcomings and scopes for future research.

The thesis ends with a select bibliography and the open-ended questionnaire used for conducting the conversational-participatory and qualitative interview with respondents who were direct activists in the Naxalite upsurge of Midnapore.

Chapter 2

Colonial State Making, 'Land to the Zamindar' and the Chuar Rebellion of Midnapore

The commencement of colonial administration in Midnapore can be traced to September 26, 1760 when Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal, ceded revenues of the districts Burdwan, Midnapore and Chittagong to the Company. This transfer of revenue rights was followed by the grant of *diwani* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765, which paved the way for revenue restructuring in the entire area. The ensuing alterations in the socio-economic fabric culminated in a series of disturbances making Midnapore the centre of first anti-colonial resistances. Undivided Midnapore of the colonial times covered a huge area encompassing locations spread across modern states of Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand. Hence for a clear understanding of the zones of resistances, a basic idea of location, topography and demography becomes essential.

The Boundaries of Midnapore: Mapping the Territory and its Frontier Nature

Attempting to pen down an account of the general history of this frontier district is quite a baffling exercise due to its territorial span. Ancient historical accounts of eastern India refer to three principalities as being the centres of civilization in the east- *Anga*, *Banga* and *Kalinga*. As Jogesh Chandra Basu notes, *Anga* constituted the modern-day divisions of Rajshahi, Bhagalpur and surrounding areas; *Kalinga* constituted the area between the river Bhagirathi in the north and Godavari in the south; *Banga* constituted the area east of *Anga* and *Kalinga*. Given this demarcation, it can be concluded that in ancient times majority of modern Midnapore district was a part of *Kalinga* principality.¹ During the Muslim period, the territory of Orissa extended till the Rupnarayan river. Under Akbar's regime, new revenue divisions were instituted under Todar Mal's supervision. The *subah* (province) of Bengal was divided into *sarkars* (equivalent to district) which in turn were divided into *mahals* (revenue unit or division). Bengal was divided into 19 *sarkars* and 682 *mahals* while Orissa into 5 *sarkars* and 90 *mahals*. Out of the 5 *sarkars* of Orissa, Jaleswar was the biggest and majority of modern Midnapore district was incorporated in it.² During the last years of Nawabi rule in Bengal, the Subarnarekha river was considered as the northern frontier of Orissa. The area

¹Jogesh Chandra Basu, *Medinipurer Itihas* (Kolkata: Annapurna Prakashani, BS 1426/ 2019), 53-54.

² W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 1 (London: Trubner & Co. 1875), 369.

located between Rupnarayan and Subarnarekha that subsequently came to be known as Midnapore was technically a part of Orissa. Even at the beginning of Company rule, it remained a part of Orissa which later on was incorporated in Bengal.³

Shah Shuja's regime and Murshiq Quli Khan's regime reorganised revenue divisions and creation of *chakla* (equivalent to district) Medinipur/Midnapore can be attributed to the latter's regime. In 1760, when *chakla* Midnapore was ceded to the Company, it incorporated as many as 54 parganas names of some of which were Midnapore, Sabang, Kharagpur, Narajole, Narayangarh, Dantanchor, Egrachor, Keshiary and Jaleswar. During the time of cessation some parganas which later on became part of Midnapore like Chandrakona, Barda were part of *chakla* Bardhaman. Between 1767 and 1770 several parganas (which currently form part of the Bengal – Jharkhand frontier districts namely Jhargram, Purulia and Bankura of Bengal, East Singhbhum of Jharkhand) were incorporated in Midnapore. Some of them are Digparoi, Bahadurpur, Kalianpur/Matkudpur, Beliabera, Barajit, Jamboni, Jhargram, Jhatibani/Silda, part of Kiarchand which went by the name Kalrui and Naiabasan/Nayabasan, Nayagram, Mallabhum, Ghatsila, Barahabhum, Ramgarh, Rohini including Moubhandar, Sankhakulya /Lalgarh, Chiara, Supur, Chhatna and Manbhoom.⁴ Attempts by the Company to incorporate many of these areas into revenue administration forms the context of the first Chuar rebellion.

If we try to locate the areas in the modern map of India, the geographical contiguity of the areas will make the fact quite evident that the borders were quite liquid in nature and areas kept shunting in and out of administrative jurisdictions of Bengal and Orissa of that period. The impact of such geography is evident in the culture and lifestyle of this region. H.V Bayley while providing an account of the people of Midnapore as late as 1852 states, "the people of Midnapore (proper) are generally composed of an amalgamated race who can neither be called Bengalees nor Oryas, but are a mixture of both."⁵ Similar views can be noted in other accounts as well. L.S.S O'Malley while writing his account of Midnapore provides the following description at the very outset,

³Basu, *Medinipurer Itihas*, 68.

⁴Basu, *Medinipurer Itihas*, 212; J.C Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore as Contained in Records Extant in the Collector's Office*, Reprint, Vol 1 (Hansebooks,2020), 29-30. Names of the areas have been spelled following Price's account.

⁵H.V Bayley, *Memoranda of Midnapore, 1852*, Reprint (Medinipur: Medinipur Itihas Rachana Samity,1988), 9.

The district of Midnapore is the southernmost district of the Burdwan Division... On the north Midnapore is bounded by the district of Bankura, and on the east the river Hooghly and its tributary the Rupnarayan separate it from the 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly. Its southern boundary is the coast line of the Bay of Bengal, while on the west the boundary marches with the Balasore district and the Mayurbhanj State in Orissa, and with the Singhbhum and Manbhum districts of Chota Nagpur. Owing to its geographical position, Midnapore is one of the most varied, as regards physical aspects, of the districts in Bengal. The north and the north-west embraces a portion of the eastern fringe of the Chota Nagpur plateau, and consist of hard laterite formation. The eastern portion has been formed out of the alluvial deposits borne down by the Hooghly and its tributaries ... On the south-west and south, the country which is geographically part of Orissa, is a maritime tract ...⁶

As W.W Hunter notes, as a district Midnapore exhibits threefold characteristics of a seaboard, a deltaic and a high lying non-fluvial area. Its eastern border is made of alluvial deposits of the river Hooghly, southern tracts are maritime and the western part is made up of hard laterite formations.⁷ The physical features of the district fall into two major and clearly defined contrasting parts. Writing as late as in 1922, A.K Jameson notes in his survey report that this physical distinction extends to all other aspects of the region like population systems, land tenures, customs etc. To quote his words,

On the west its true affinities are with the jungle uplands of Chota Nagpur sparsely populated by aboriginal and semi-aboriginal people while on the east, the unbroken monotony of the level rice lands swarming with a dense population of Bengali or mixed Bengali -Uriya stock proclaiming it to be part of the true Bengal, the land of silt and swamp.⁸

The account of O'Malley can be more easily associated with undivided Midnapore of independent India. The frontier status of the area between Bengal and Orissa had kept it in constant turmoil due to rivalries. Historical accounts provide evidence of the area moving in and out of kingdoms geographically identifiable with either Bengal or Orissa. When Bengal passed into the hands of the Muhammedans, as O'Malley notes, the river Damodar formed the boundary between Bengal and Orissa while Midnapore with Arambagh subdivision of the Hooghly district formed the frontier of the Orissa. In 1568, Sulaiman Karrani, the Afghan ruler of Bengal defeated his Oriya counterpart and Midnapore passed into Afghan rule. It had

⁶ L.S.S O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers : Midnapore*, Reprint (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2018), 1-2.

⁷W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: District of Midnapur and Hugli (including Howrah)*, Vol.3, Reprint (London: Forgotten Books,2018), 5.

⁸A.K Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore, 1911-1917*(Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1922),1-2.

remained under the rule of the Oriyas for about four and half centuries. Even under the Afghan rule of Bengal, the area remained a frontier for clashes between Afghans and Mughals for control of Bihar and Orissa.⁹ The clashes escalated during the reign of the last Afghan ruler, Daud Karrani. The rivalry culminated in the battle of 3rd March, 1575 known as the Battle of Mughalmari. Though the Afghans were defeated, resurgence of revolts continued. Under the leadership of Man Singh, the final battle was fought along the banks of Subarnarekha in the forests of Midnapore from November 1592 onwards and by March 1593 the Mughal conquest of Orissa and Midnapore was complete. During the Afghan rule, the district comprised two *sarkars* i.e. Jaleswar and Madaran. North eastern and eastern portions like Hijili/Hijli lay within Madaran and the rest of the district with 23 or 24 *mahals* partially or wholly was part of Jaleswar. After the Mughal conquest, Midnapore remained part of *subah* Orissa. Separate Governor was appointed directly from the court of Jahangir in Delhi. Under Shah Jahan's rule, Orissa was placed under his son Shah Shuja's control who was appointed the Governor of Bengal. During his second tenure (1646-58), revenue resettlement of Bengal and Orissa was given effect, under which Sarkar Jaleswar was detached from Orissa and annexed to Bengal.¹⁰

Under Murshiq Quli's settlement of 1722, Bengal was grouped into thirteen large divisions called *chaklas*. The area covered by Midnapore was divided between *chaklas* Hijli, Hooghly and Burdwan besides the zamindari of Tamluk. The *chaklas* were then divided into *parganas*. During Ali Vardi Khan's tenure this region was again in turmoil due to tensions between Bengal and Orissa and more specifically due to depredations by the Marathas who in popular terminology were referred to as the *bargis*.¹¹

Writing in 1876, Hunter describes the district as being bounded by Bankura district on the north, Hugli and Howrah on the east, district of Balasore on the south, the tributary state of "Morbhanj" (Mayurbhanj) on the west and district of Purulia on the north west.¹² Like Malley

⁹L.S.S O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, 21-22.

¹⁰O Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, 25-26.

¹¹ For details check O Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers : Midnapore*, 29-32. The impact of raids by the *bargis* in Bengal, linked to the Maratha Confederacy, was quite huge. The Maratha Confederacy comprised of four leading Maratha families- Sindhia, Holkar, Bhonsle and Gaikwad. The Bhonsles of Nagpur under the leadership of Raghoji Bhonsle extended Maratha control eastwards annexing Orissa and invaded Bengal on various occasions. The Maratha cavalry and its pillage of western Bengal is popularly referred to as *Bargi/Borgi* attacks. The word *bargi* is a corruption of the Marathi word *bargir* which means light cavalry. References to *bargis* has made its way into Bengali poems, lullabies and the plight of the common people reeling under dual pressure of revenue payment and looting by the *bargis* is quite evident from them.

¹² Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol.3, 18.

and others, Hunter also notes that the division of the country during the Muslim rule named *sarkar* Jaleswar coincided with the later area that came to be delimited as Midnapore district including western and Southern Hijli. There were 28 smaller divisions or mahals. Following Hunter, a summary sketch of the divisions can be provided for better understanding.

Table 2.1

DIVISIONS OF SARKAR JALESWAR	
NAME	LOCATION
Bansdiha	Around the town of Jaleswar (District Balasore)
Pippili	Town on the banks of Subarnarekha (District Balasore)
Balishahi	Southern Hijili/Hijli
Balikuti	Balasore District
Biripada	Near Morbhanj/Mayurbhanj
Bhograi	At the Mouth of Subarnarekha- partly in Balasore district and Partly in Hijili division of Midnapore
Bagri	North Midnapore bordering Bankura and Hugli districts
Bazar	Along Kasai river- south east of Midnapore town
Brahmanbhum	Northern Midnapore
Jaleswar	Fiscal division of Balasore
Tamluk	Large pargana of Midnapore on the banks of Rupnarayan
Tarkua	Fiscal division south west of Midnapore
Dawarpara/Shorbhum	unidentified
Ramna	Town west of Balasore
Rain	On the frontier of Orissa
Raipur	Situated on Upper Kasai, within Manbhum district
Karshi	Unidentified
Maljhata	Hijili division of Midnapore
Midnapore	Described as large town with two forts – one old and one new
Subang, Siari, Kasijora, Kharagpur, Kedarkund, Karai, Gagnapur/Gagneswar, Mhakanghat/Kutabpur, Narayanpur/Khandar	Within the limits of modern district of Midnapore

Source: Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 18-19. Names and spellings of places have been kept unaltered.

When ceded to the East India Company, the area of Midnapore was 6102 square miles and it included areas of present Midnapore, portion of Balasore, north of the river Subarnarekha, Dhalbhum subdivision of Singhbhum, Barabhum and Manbhum, Junglemahals of Chatna and

Ambikanagar of Bankura. It *excluded* at that time Hijli, Tamluk and Mahisadal (then under jurisdiction of Hooghly district), Pataspur, Kamardichor and Bhograi (then under Maratha rule), Ghatal subdivision, Garbeta and parts of Salboni and Keshpur (then under Burdwan district).¹³ J. C Price provides the following account of the territorial extent of Midnapore *chakla* as it was transferred,

On the outer edge of the Company's Midnapore jurisdiction was Bhanjabhum on the north; to the west Bahadurpur; lower down Dharinda, Balarampur, Narayangarh or Fatehgar (called also Bomjan), and Khandar. Pataspur which belonged to the Mahrattas, had to be skipped over. Then came Uttarbehara; lower down Dantamutta; then came in succession Amarsi, Bajrapur, Bhunyamutta, Sabang, Mayanachor, Kashijora, Kutubpur, and Narajol, as the eye travels on the map from west to south; then east; and finally rests on Bhanjabhum again... all pergunnahs such as Shapur, Kedarkund, Kharakpur and others, lying within the enclosure bounded by the limits of these pergunnahs, formed part of the *chakla* of Midnapore.¹⁴

The colonial administration in course of their experiments kept on introducing, modifying and abandoning administrative changes. Changes in jurisdiction of districts were one of them and such jurisdictional changes generally fell under one of the following heads- revenue, civil and criminal. For instance, at the time of Decennial Settlement of 1789 the fiscal divisions of Tamluk and Mahishadal which was under separate jurisdiction of Hijli were transferred to Midnapore. Hijli remained a separate collectorate and was annexed to Midnapore in 1836. Divisions like Bhograi which were part of Hijli were transferred to Balasore district of Orissa. Even Chandrakona which was part of Hugli was transferred to Midnapore in the 1870s.¹⁵ A compilation of various changes can be provided here for clear understanding.

¹³Rai Monmohan Chakrabatti Bahadur, *A Summary of Changes in the Jurisdiction of Districts in Bengal 1757-1916* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press, 1918), 34.

¹⁴J.C Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 28.

¹⁵ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. 3, 21-22.

Table 2.2

SAMPLE CHANGES IN JURISDICTION OF MIDNAPORE DISTRICT

Year	Changes in jurisdiction	Reasons and authority for changes
1793	Six Junglemahals (Raipur, Syamsundarpur, Khurshal, Phulkushma, Simlapal and Bheliadihi) transferred from Burdwan	For better control of border tribes; Governor General's order dated 27 th September, 1793
1795	Bagri (Thana Garhbeta transferred from Burdwan)	Administrative convenience- Regulation XXXVI of 1795
1800	Pargana Brahmanbhum, part of Bogri not transferred, portion of pargana Chitwa and Daspur south of the Rupnarayan transferred from Hooghly	Excessive work at Hooghly. Order dated 27 th November, 1800
1801	Bogri (revenue) transferred from Bardhaman	Administrative Convenience- Order dated 26 th February, 1801
1803	Three parganas Patashpur, Bhograi and Kamardichaur of the Marathas attached to Midnapore Magistracy	By conquest; Regulations XIII and XIV of 1805
1805	Seven jungle mahals (Chhatna, Barabhum, Manbhum, Sripur, Aminagar, Simlapal, Bheliadihi) transferred to Jungle Mahals district	Disturbed state of the border and the raids of the Chuars; Regulation XVIII of 1805
1806	The three Maratha parganas annexed to Hijili Salt Agency	Administrative convenience
1809	The revenue collections of the Junglemahals which were being made at Birbhum and Midnapore transferred to Bardhaman and placed under the charge of the Registrar to the Magistrate with his headquarters at Bankura	Economy order dated 23 rd January, 1809
1833	Dhalbhum transferred to South West Frontier Agency	For improvement of criminal and police administration; Regulation XIII of 1833
1834	Hijli amalgamated with Midnapore	Lack of work; order dated September 1, 1834
1837	Parganas Bhograi, Kamardichaur and Shahbandar transferred to Balasore	Administrative convenience; Order dated February 28, 1837
1872	Thanas Ghatal and Chandrakona transferred from Hooghly	Administrative convenience; Order dated June 17, 1872

Source: Chakrabatti Bahadur, *A Summary of Changes in the Jurisdiction of Districts in Bengal* 34-35.¹⁶

¹⁶ Published in 1918, the districts mentioned in the book are Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore, Hooghly, Howrah, Calcutta, Murshidabad, Jessore, Khulna, Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Chittagong, Chittagong hill tracts, Tippera, Noakhali, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Pabna, Bogra, Malda and helps to paint in reader's mind a picture of Bengal at that time. To understand changes in jurisdiction of the various districts refer to pages 28-65.

Similar accounts can be traced to other sources as well. Keith Jameson notes that on the east and south-east, most of Contai, Tamluk constituted the faujdari of Hijily and was not amalgamated with Midnapore till 1836 as we can see in the table above. The north east formed part of Hugli and Garbeta thana on the north was in Burdwan. On the south the district extended to include part of the present district of Balasore while on the west and north west it extended into present districts of Bankura, Manbhum and Singbhum.¹⁷

The Population Census of 1872¹⁸ can be used to help the modern reader grasp what constitutes undivided Midnapore as we roughly understand in the post-independence context. The subdivisions and police circles can be identified as follows:

Table 2.3

MIDNAPORE DISTRICT, 1872	
SUBDIVISION	POLICE CIRCLE
Headquarters	Midnapore, Narayangarh, Dantun, Gopiballavpur, Jhargaoon, Bhimpur, Salbani, Kespur, Daspur, Debra, Sabang
Tamluk	Tamluk, Panchkura, Maslandpur, Sutahata, Nandigaon
Contai (Kanthi)	Contai (Kanthi), Raghunathpur, Egra, Kedgereee (Khejiri), Pataspur, Bhagwanpur
Garhbeta	Garhbeta, Chandrakona, Ghatal

Source: Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 42-43. Hunter's spellings of various areas in the table have been kept unaltered. Current versions appear slightly different like Dantan (Dantun), Jhargram (Jhargaoon), Panskura (Panchkura), Nandigram (Nandigaon), Khejuri (Kedgereee)

Jameson in his 1922 survey report provides the following revenue divisions of the second largest district of the Bengal Presidency after Mymensingh- Sadar Subdivision (Binpur, Garhbeta, Salboni, Keshpur, Jhargram, Midnapore, Debra, Sabang, Kharagpur, Naraingarh, Dantan and Gopiballavpur), Ghatal Subdivision (Chandrakona, Ghatal, Daspur), Tamluk Subdivision (Panskura, Tamluk, Mahisadal, Sutahata, Nandigram), Contai Subdivision (Bhagabanpur, Khejri, Contai, Ramnagar, Egra, Pataspur).¹⁹ As the study spans till 1970s, the

¹⁷ Keith Jameson, "The Permanent Settlement in Midnapore", pp.44-57, *The Calcutta Review*, no. 291 (July, 1918): 44.

¹⁸ The earliest recorded attempt for population census was by Sir, Henry Strachey in 1802 who was the judge and magistrate of Midnapore. Further attempts were made in 1837, 1852, 1866 with a more comprehensive one being made in 1872.

¹⁹ A.K Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore, 1911-1917*, Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1922, 1.

subdivisions of the district according to the 1971 census can be provided to establish connection with the colonial period,

Table 2.4

MIDNAPORE DISTRICT, 1971	
SUBDIVISION	POLICE STATION
Sadar	Mohanpur, Dantan, Keshari, Narayangarh, Sabang, Pingla, Kharagpur, Debra, Midnapore, Keshpur, Salbani, Garhbeta
Ghatal	Chandrakona, Ghatal, Daspur,
Tamluk	Panskura, Moyna, Tamluk, Mahisadal, Sutahata, Nandigram
Contai	Bhagwanpur, Patashpur, Egra, Ramnagar, Digha, Contai, Khejri
Jhargram	Binpur, Jamboni, Jhargram, Gopiballavpur, Sankrail, Nayagram

Source: Directorate of Census Operations, *District Census Handbook Midnapore*, Series 22, Part X-C (Midnapore: Controller, Government Printing, 1971), 3-6.

If we consider the current map of India all the areas mentioned in the aforesaid account of the colonial period will be found spread across Midnapore (East), Midnapore (West) and Jhargram districts of Bengal, Balasore district of Odisha and East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand.

Nature of Revenue Farming in the District under Early Colonial Administration

Under the Mughals the first systematic assessment of revenue in this area was made by Todar Mal during Akbar's reign. The *subah* of Bengal at that time was divided into nineteen administrative divisions called *sarkars*. When Orissa was conquered by the Mughals in 1592, the *subah* was divided into five *sarkars* namely Jaleswar, Bhadrak, Cuttack, Kalinga and Rajamundry. Sarkar Jaleswar was divided into sub-sarkars Goalpara (28 *mahals*), Jaleswar (22 *mahals*), Maljitha (21 *mahals*) and Mascoory (11 *mahals*). The next revision was made by Murshid Quli Khan in 1722. New administrative division of *chakla* was introduced which was redistributed later into *zillahs* or districts by the Company.²⁰

In 1760 when Midnapore was ceded to the Company, the revenue administration was directly managed by the Council at Fort William. Both Midnapore and Burdwan were administered

²⁰Syed Rashed Ali, *Midnapore District: Company, Raiyats and Zamindars 1760-1885* (Kolkata: K.P Bagchi and Company, 2008), 12-13.

through officers known as Residents. As Price notes, the principal European servant of the Company in Midnapore retained the title of Resident or Chief till 1772. In 1779 the official designation was changed to that of Collector. The Resident had complete control over revenue settlements, presided over the police stations or *thanas*, had a potential voice in civil and criminal jurisdiction and also directed all military movements.²¹ John Johnstone was the first resident of Midnapore followed by others. It is to be noted that all primary accounts on the various resistances and military expeditions in the district during this period can be obtained from letters to and from this Office.

While planning for revenue administration of the district, the Company officials had collected some previous accounts and decided that for convenience the zamindars of the district should continue to enjoy their rights. So long as they paid their dues with regularity, they were not to be removed from collection. Given the strategic position of the area, the Company felt it necessary to preserve the goodwill of the locals, who if offended might desert to Maratha territory in peacetime or join with them during disturbances. Letting out lands to *ijaradars* (leaseholders) was also considered to be problematic as the traditional zamindars would be left idle. Hence in the initial period, land in the district was in the hands of hereditary zamindars who derived proprietary rights from *sanads* granted to their ancestors by Mughal government. The situation changed in the later years.

When Johnstone took charge of the district the annual revenue of the district was Rs. 4,62,036/ which he increased to Rs. 5,92,137/-. This assessment continued under the successive Residents namely John Burdett, Anselm Beumont and Hugh Watts till 1765. When John Graham was appointed resident in 1765, he scrutinised the returns and was dissatisfied with them. Not satisfied with intermediate information, he made an extensive tour of the zamindaris, obtained knowledge of waste lands, state of production and extent of cultivation and additional revenue demands were placed on at least 17 parganas like Midnapore, Sabang, Kashijora, Maynachoura, Narajol, Narayangarh to name a few.²² The total revenue was increased by him to Rs. 8,13,168/-²³ In the same period, the revenue of Junglemahal parganas of the district was also increased but given the fact that the zamindars

²¹ For full details on the office of the Resident/ Collector and his functions check J.C Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 1-25.

²² "Select Committee to the Resident", Copy of Letters for the Period 1763-70 (March 17, 1766), 71, cited in Rashed Ali, *Midnapore District: Company, Raiyats and Zamindars*, 30.

²³ "Collector to Collector General", *Proceedings of Calcutta Committee of Revenue*, Vol.2 (January 30, 1771), 112, West Bengal State Archives.

did not submit to pay the rent, the annual expenses of the company to send military expeditions to quell them was as great as annual rents of these areas.

The years 1769 and 1770 hit Midnapore as badly as it did the remaining parts of Bengal. Severe drought, crop loss, rise in prices of basic foodgrains resulting in famine followed by epidemic wreaked havoc on the population. The Company ignored the gravity of the situation and revenue demands were kept intact and relief activities were minimum. The land revenue demand can be summarised as follows,

Table 2.5

LAND REVENUE DEMAND IN MIDNAPORE (1760-71)	
Year	Revenue in rupees
1760	4,62,036
1761	5,92,137
1765	8,13,168
1770	10,05,308
1771	10,13,848

Source: *Proceedings of Calcutta Committee of Revenue*, Vol.2 and 2A (West Bengal State Archives), cited in Rashed Ali, *Midnapore District: Company, Raiyats and Zamindars*, 34.

From this account it becomes clear that the revenue demand was doubled in ten years span and such increased revenues could not have been collected without consequences. The most direct effect was zamindars falling in revenue arrears resulting in sale of estates and undue pressure on the cultivators to fulfil demands. As Chitta Panda notes in his work, the entire area of 5000 square miles was divided into around a dozen hereditary zamindars who in the pre-British days were almost entirely autonomous. The fertile alluvial coastal zone in the south and south east was the domain of seven hereditary zamindars of 16th century origin- Jalamutha, Kashijora, Majnamutha, Mainachura, Mahisadal, Tamluk and Sujamutha. The part-alluvial, part-littoral tract in the north and centre was under the 16th century hereditary Raja of Midnapore. The littoral Junglemahal region of the western part was divided among four Rajas of Jhargram, Jamboni, Nayagram and Nayabasan. Nayabasan was under the sphere of influence of the neighbouring raja of Mayurbhanj.²⁴ By 1799 there was a 37% increase in land revenue demand and between 1793 and 1816, 53 percent of the estates were

²⁴Chitta Panda, *The Decline of Bengal Zamindars: Midnapore (1870-1920)* (Delhi: Oxford university Press, 1996), 4-5

sold through public auctions by the Collector of Midnapore or by the Secretary of the Board of Revenue in Calcutta. This figure excluded Hijli and Junglemahals.²⁵

The question may automatically arise that how did the Company increase revenue assessments. It was certainly not because of sudden increase in cultivation and production. The main source of such increase was cancellation of allowances that the Mughal government had granted for various services rendered.²⁶ The main allowances that became targets for resumption by the administration were rent free lands and service tenures. Such grants were generally made informally while the Select Committee clearly maintained that all lands held rent free without proper *sanad* should be resumed to public revenue and directed the Collector to verify such matters strictly.²⁷ This was the main source of social discontent during this period that fuelled the resistances.

An account of the land tenures that existed in Midnapore can be provided here for general understanding. Hunter in his work, *A Statistical Account of Bengal (1876)*, provides a classification based on the report of Babu Kali Prasanna Chaudri, Deputy Collector dated 3rd July, 1873. Similar divisions have been provided by L.S.S O Malley in his *District Gazetteer* on Midnapore. Though the accounts date much later than the Chuar-Paik revolts, a glance through the categories can throw light on the nature of tenures that existed.

Table 2.6

ORDINARY RENT PAYING TENURES

Tenure	Description
Zamindaris	Ordinarily consisting of parganas or a division of land forming large estates which paid revenue directly to the government.
Independent (<i>kusuri</i>) and Dependent (<i>maskuri/shikmi</i>) taluks	Smaller than zamindaris; hereditary and transferable as long as revenue is paid; existed during Muslim rule as grants, as mark of favour or on condition of clearing waste lands; independent taluks paid revenue directly to government; dependent taluks paid via zamindar or another proprietor.
<i>Nankar taluks</i>	Tracts of land left out of assessment as support of the zamindars and their families.
<i>Kamdura</i> tenures	Granted by zamindars previous to Permanent Settlement as marks of favour or jungle clearing; hereditary and transferable.
<i>Panchaki</i> tenures	Before Permanent Settlement, land grants made by zamindars as marks of

²⁵ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, 1760-1850* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979), 58-59, 169.

²⁶ Collector to the Committee of Revenue, May 22, 1771, "Proceedings of Committee of Revenue", Vol. 2A, 119, West Bengal State Archives

²⁷ "Resolution of the Select Committee", October 14, 1766, *Report of the Select Committee*, Vol. 2A, 264, West Bengal State Archives.

Tenure	Description
	favour with rents being assessed at low rates; <i>panchaki</i> meaning usually one fifth of the usual rent rate
<i>Peshkashi</i> tenures	An estate held at a quit-rent.
<i>Jalpai</i>	Specific to Midnapore. Lands which chiefly supplied fuel for boiling the brine/fuel lands were known by this name; Related to <i>malangis</i> and part of zamindaris in salt producing areas of Contai and Tamluk Subdivisions.
<i>Istimrari</i> taluks	Farms/leases granted by government or zamindar in perpetuity at a stipulated rent or in charity at a quit rent.
<i>Aimas</i>	Tenures granted rent free, or subject to a small quit rent to learned or pious Muslims or for religious or charitable uses in relation to Islam.
<i>Patnis</i>	This trend originated after Permanent Settlement; granted by zamindars to lessees known as patnidars at rents fixed in perpetuity to be held through generations.
<i>Darpatnis</i> and <i>Sepatnis</i>	Under-tenures created by Patnidars.
<i>Ijara</i>	Arabic word meaning ‘price’ or ‘hire’; contract tenancies of middle-men between proprietors of land and actual cultivators; lands leased at specific rates for limited periods.
<i>Dar-Ijaras</i>	Under-tenures created by Ijaradars.
<i>Ijara Zarpeshgi</i>	Temporary lease granted on receipt of advance from the lessee; proprietor had right to re-entry at expiration of term; indebted landholders mainly granted such leases.
<i>Katkina Ijara</i>	Temporary lease or sublease granted at a rack rent; lessees were bound to pay such rents without raising objection on grounds of non-collection or insufficient collection
<i>Jot Mandli</i>	This tenure is a product of unwritten custom; supposed to be originated from the practice of leasing lands to village headmen called mandals on liberal rates of rent; proprietors of estates granted such leases in perpetuity at fixed rates or for a term of years; found mainly in jungle tracts of the district as incentives for land reclamation.
<i>Nij Jot, Khamar</i> or <i>Sir Lands</i>	Lands retained by zamindar or other proprietors cultivating them with hired labour or tenants-at-will paying as rent either half the produce ordinarily called bhog jama or a determinate share of produce called sanja jama or paying rent in money.
<i>Jot zamin</i>	Common name for holding of an ordinary cultivator. Different sub types exist: <i>Maurusi jots</i> (hereditary leases of land granted to husbandmen for cultivation and are ordinarily transferable), <i>Mukarrari jots</i> (leases of land granted to husbandmen for cultivation at fixed rents but generally not hereditary), <i>khudkasht jots</i> (the holdings of resident cultivators i.e. lands tilled by cultivators residing in the village to which their lands belong), <i>Paikasht Jots</i> (lands cultivated by non-resident ryots; ordinary holdings held at rates decided upon by parties), <i>Korfa Jots</i> (holdings of under tenants of ordinary cultivators).

Source: Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 86-93; O’ Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, 136-141.

The rent-free tenures were of the following categories:

Table 2.7
RENT FREE TENURES

Tenure	Description
<i>Lakhiraj</i>	Grants to hold land exempt from revenue payment in perpetuity or for life only; provided to persons who provided public services for religious or charitable purposes, maintaining troops etc.
<i>Debottar</i> lands	Estates granted rent free the proceeds being appropriated to worship and support Hindu idols and temples; after donation the rights of donor lapsed; inalienable and indivisible but temporary leases extending to the life of the <i>sebayet</i> or <i>mahant</i> (manager or superintendent of the establishment of worship).
<i>Brahmottar</i> Lands	Estates granted to Brahmins for their support and that of their descendants.
<i>Vasishnavottar</i> lands	Estates granted to Vaishnav devotees; transferable and liable to be sold for grantee's debts.
<i>Mahattran</i> lands	Estates granted to persons of respectability or for religious purposes.
<i>Khushbash</i> lands	Granted to persons for as sites for dwelling houses etc.
<i>Bhattottar</i> lands	Lands granted to <i>bhats</i> or bards (poets).
<i>Ganakottar</i> lands	Lands granted to <i>ganaks</i> or fortune tellers, astrologers and genealogists.
<i>Sanyasottar</i> lands	Lands granted for support of <i>sanyasis</i> or religious ascetics.
<i>Khanabari</i> lands	Lands on which dwellings and outhouses of zamindars are situated, homestead sites, vegetable gardens etc
<i>Wakf</i> lands	Like debottar lands, these are granted for Islam in religious and charitable purposes
<i>Madad-Mash</i>	Land granted rent free to pious or learned Mohammedans.
<i>Pirottar</i> lands	Land granted rent free for support of the tombs of <i>Pirs</i> i.e. saints and holy men of Islamic faith.
<i>Nazrat</i> lands	Presents made in land for religious purposes.
<i>Khankar</i>	Lands granted for temporary residence of Islamic religious mendicants.

Source: Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 94-97; O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers:Midnapore*, 141-143, Jameson, *Final Report on Survey and Settlement Operations*, 48-50.

In addition to the above there are various kinds of service tenures granted rent free in return for military or other services. The categories are as under:

Table 2.8
SERVICE TENURES

Tenure	Description
Paikan lands	Peculiar to Midnapore; given to paiks or village watchmen in the shape of military tenures some at low quit rents called <i>peshkash</i> and some free of all rent
<i>Patwari Jagirs</i>	Lands assigned to <i>patwaris</i> or village accountants in lieu of wages
<i>Arzi Piyada Jagirs</i>	Lands assigned to messengers and bailiffs attached to the Collector's office in lieu of salary
<i>Daftri Jagir</i>	7 acres plot of land held as service by the under-record keeper (<i>daftri</i>) in the collector's office
<i>Behara Jagir; Napit Jagir; Kumar Jagir</i>	Lands granted to <i>palki</i> bearers (<i>behara</i>), barbers (<i>napit</i>), earthen pot makers (<i>kumar</i>).

Source: Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 97-100, O' Malley, Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore, 143-146, Jameson, Final Report on Survey and Settlement Operations, 50-51.

The main purpose of providing a detailed breakup of the tenures is to signify the baffling nature of proprietorship in land and how difficult it was for the Company to locate the source of payment of land revenue and assess revenue. The nature of *paikan* lands demands an extended treatment both because of its intrinsic interest stakes and the length and complexity of the negotiations involved in it. This will be delved in details in the following section of our discussion.

Moving back to the revenue administration, the next landmark was the Pitt's India Act of 1784 where guidelines were issued for permanent settlement of revenues. In 1787, instructions were given to the Collectors to make enquiries regarding resources of the district under their control. The Regulations for the Decennial Settlement of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was passed in September 18, 1789, November 25, 1789 and February 10, 1790 respectively. The Settlement was to be made for a period of 10 years after expiry of which it would become permanent. In 1793, this Decennial Settlement was declared permanent making zamindars chief proprietors of land.

For the Decennial Settlement of Midnapore various prescriptions were made by the Governor General in Council and the important ones may be discussed precisely as follows:

- The Collector was given full responsibility and power for determining the *jama* of the zamindars in proportion to the resources of their estates. In case of doubts,

measurements of land and investigation of produce were to be made. Reduction in religious expenditures was advised.²⁸

- Settlement was to be made with zamindars and independent talukdars (those who paid revenue immediately to the government). Except for expenses of government officers, all charges relating to revenue collection were to be arranged by the zamindar from produce of his soil. In case the zamindar or talukdar refused to accept the *jama*, the matter should pass to the Board of Revenue who would report to the Governor General in Council and for that period the land would be held *khas*.²⁹
- All zamindars and talukdars assessed were to distribute total assessments in the several villages under their jurisdiction equally and impartially according to rents derived from them. In case of non-conformity penalty was to be imposed.³⁰
- The zamindari estates of minor, female, lunatic and notorious proprietors were to be considered *khas* but the *jama* of such lands and profits beyond the amount after discharging all should belong to the proprietor. The expenses of the manager and his establishment were to be paid by the Collector.³¹
- Prescriptions were also given regarding treatment of the *raiya*ts and prevention of oppression. The rents demanded on them should be based on specific customs and rules and so should be the amounts. For every village, the zamindar should appoint a *patwari* to record raiyat accounts. No zamindar should be allowed to cancel '*pattah*'³² of *khudkhasht raiya*ts³³ except on grounds mentioned in the resolutions.³⁴
- When the *jama* of a *raiya*t was ascertained and settled, he should be authorised to demand a *pattah* from the zamindar, refusing which was liable to penalty. All rent collectors were compelled to give receipts. The receipts to raiyats were to specify all relevant details on rent, nature of *raiya*ti (*khudkasht/paikasht*), amount of land etc. No new *abwabs* could be imposed and any exaction of such sort was liable to be penalized.³⁵

²⁸ "Resolution of Governor General in Council", *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, Vol.81 (November 25, 1789), 129-131, West Bengal State Archives.

²⁹ *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, Vol.81, 134-138.

³⁰ *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, Vol.81, 143-144.

³¹ *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, Vol.81, 145.

³² *Patta* or proof of ownership is the primary document that establishes legal ownership of land or property.

³³ Permanent resident cultivators of a village. *Paikasht* raiyats on the other hand cultivated lands away from their residential village.

³⁴ *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, Vol.81, 146-148.

³⁵ *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, Vol.81, 149-150.

In each and every prescription cited above anomalies in application prevailed. Though the zamindars were instructed not to oppress the raiyats and under Permanent Settlement provisions the Controlling Commission of Revenue was given the power to monitor and redress raiyat grievances, the administrative directives were weak overall and the legal mechanisms put in place of customary arrangements was alien to the cultivator. The zamindar in the initial stages of the application was not in a favourable position as well. There were problems of general over-assessment by the Collector and rigorous methods of revenue collection from the zamindars where failure led to auctioning away of estates. Other issues were coercive rent collection from the cultivators to meet revenue demands, lack of legal protection of cultivator interests and apathy and negligence of land along with customs and people of the jungle tracts. The cumulative effect of all such factors disrupted the socio-economic and customary fabric of the region, thereby providing a fertile ground for resistances to brew.

Thus, the early phases of colonial administration finally culminating in the Permanent Settlement led to revolution in land relations. From ancient times the communitarian customary rights enjoyed by the peasants on land in self-sufficient village communities were disrupted. Four phases of resistances to changing revenue arrangements can be identified here. All these resistances are more or less clubbed under the common denomination of Chuar Rebellion. The first phase of the rebellion was the result of armed settlement of various frontier areas and the resultant reactions. It had three recurrences in 1784-1786, 1798-1799 and 1832. The revolt of 1784-1786 occurred in Birbhum against revision of rent roles in Birbhum estate after increase in revenue assessment by the Collector. The 1799 phase was the reaction to Permanent Settlement and the 1832 phase is popularly known as the Bhumij revolt or Ganga Narain's *Hungama* (turmoil) which took place along similar revenue and oppression related causal framework in Barabhum and Dhalbhum areas.

Armed Pacification of Zamindaris by Force and the Chuar Rebellion- Phase I

Midnapore during the entire period of Company rule and especially during the initial phase was not a tranquil district. There was constant disturbance of the Marathas. At various points of time Marathas overran and captured different parts which had to be recovered by use of force. The direct conflict with the Marathas ceased with the Second Anglo Maratha war (1803-1805) which resulted in the EIC gaining control of Orissa. The other sources of trouble

were the Raja of Mayurbhanj³⁶ and armed resistance by jungle zamindars of the southwestern part against imposition of revenue administration by the Company. J.C Price notes the difficulties faced by the Company in the following words,

The river Subarnarekha was looked upon generally as the limit of the Company's territory on the west and that of the Mahratta occupations of the east; but both parties had acquired lands which were altogether separated by the river from the bulk of their possessions on the opposite side....

.... The most common and natural limit between this Zillah and the Mahratta territory to the west is the Subarnarekha river; but while some of the Mahratta lands lie to the east of the river, some of the Company's lands lie to the west of it. This state of things is productive of many disputes and inconveniences.³⁷

O' Malley refers to the following areas when talking about the extensive jungle tracts of the district which were the source of trouble— Brahmanbhum, Bagri, Bhanjabhum, Bahadurpur, Dharinda, Diparoi, Chiara, Nayabasan, Baliabera, Jhargram, Jambani, Kalyanpur, Silda or Jhatibani, Rohini- Mabhandar, Dipa-Kiarchand, Lalgah or Sankakuila and Ramgarh. Price refers to the same area as "Jungle Mehals".³⁸ The zamindars which these administrators referred to as 'jungle chiefs' were of a different nature. A description of 1778 can be quoted as under.

The western jungle is an extent of country around eight miles in breadth and sixty in length. On the east it is bounded by Midnapore, on the west by Singbhum, on the north by Panchet and on the south by Morbhanj. There is a little land cultivated in its whole extent and a very disproportionate part of it is capable of cultivation. The soil is very rocky. The country is mountainous, and overspread with thick forests, which render it in many places utterly impassable. It has always been annexed to the Province of Midnapore, but from its barrenness it was never very greatly regarded by the Nawab's government, and the zamindars sometimes paid their rent or rather tribute and sometimes not. These zamindars were mere freebooters who plunder their neighbours and one another; and their tenants are banditti, whom they chiefly employ in their outrages. These depredations keep the zamindars and their servants continually in arms; for after the harvest is gathered there is scarcely one of them who does not call his tenants together, either to defend his own property or attack his neighbour.³⁹

³⁶The Raja of Mayurbhanj was nominally subject to the Maratha governor in Cuttack. He held the *pargana* of Nayabasan (currently in Gopiballavpur, Jhargram district) as a revenue paying estate distinct from his independent territory. The government faced immense difficulties in realizing demands from him and he often carried out raids and instigated insurgencies in other settled parts of the district. He also made proprietary claims and the English had to join hands with the Maratha governor of Orissa to bring him under control. See O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, 38 and Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 20-21.

³⁷ Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 28.

³⁸ O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, 39; Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 66-74.

³⁹ O Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, 39-40; Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 19-20.

On account of tension in the area, a large number of forts can be seen. These were the zamindari strongholds against attacks both from Marathas and from the neighbouring zamindars. Hunter provides a description of Kila Mainachaura (Moynagarh Rajbari in the current district of East Midnapore) which can be quoted here,

It is surrounded by two ditches- one wet and one dry- both formerly very deep and broad, and filled with alligators. Within its inner ditch was another defence of closely-planted bamboos, so intertwined with each other as to be impervious to an arrow, and unapproachable by cavalry, which formed the main force of Mahratta invaders. The ground thus enclosed is wide, and contains many houses. The zamindar of Mainachaura, like his brethren of the jungles, was not then, as now, a peaceful subject, and used to shut himself up in his fort whenever called upon to settle for his lands or to pay his revenue.⁴⁰

Similar were the practices of other zamindaris as well. Fergusson in his letter to George Vansittart (Resident/ Collector of Midnapore jointly with John Graham in 1767, and solely in 1768) dated 28th and 29th March, 1767, provided the following account of the Ghatsila fort,

It is situated on a plain surrounded with jungles; its area nearly 1, 150 square foot. It has a rampart of very bad earth, or rather gravel... but the ditch is excellent, being forty-two feet wide and 18 feet high to the level without... the bridge over the ditch... is a set of trees laid horizontally and covered with earth... within, in the very centre of the fort, was the zemindar's particular dwelling house, surrounded by a very high and thick wall, being to the north and south 288 by 240 feet to the east and west..."⁴¹

Most of them were designated as *Rajas* and even till date there are informally referred to as *Rajas* locally and their lineage as *Rajbongsho*. Some ancient lineages in the area are those of Jhargram, Jamboni, Ramgarh and Lalgah, Silda, Beliabera Praharaj, Nayagram and Jamirapalgarh. The Goswamis of Gopiballavpur have a special socio-religious status to be discussed in a separate chapter.

Most of these areas had to be brought under subjugation by military expeditions. In a letter dated 17th March, 1766 Harry Verlest writing to John Graham instructed the latter to carry out surveys to "obtain a complete and just valuation of the lands in the Midnapore and Jallasore provinces" and conclude annual revenues by the end of August. In the same letter it was clearly instructed,

The reduction of the Zemindars to the westward you will undertake as soon as possible, and their forts (except such as you may think necessary for the protection of the country) must be entirely demolished. Such of the Zemindars as may readily submit and engage for the regular payment of their revenues agreeable to the custom of other parts of the

⁴⁰ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 20.

⁴¹ J.C Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 51

province may be continued; those that do not should be entirely routed out, and other persons employed in their place.⁴²

The first steps to subjugate and settle these areas began from 1767. In a letter dated 30th January, 1767 from John Graham (the then Resident and Collector of Midnapore) to Ensign John Fergusson, clear instructions were given regarding settlement with the zamindars.

Such of the zemindars as readily and willingly demean themselves to our government, and give security for the payment of an equitable revenue and their future good conduct, it is intended shall be continued in their possessions: and many of them, I am told, will show a very early disposition to comply with these terms... in general I beg leave to remark to you that as it is more the intention of our government effectually to secure the zemindars' submission than to make temporary advantage of it, I think that end will be best accomplished by settling the payment of an equitable rent and claiming from them one of their nearest relations to reside by way of hostage at Midnapore, at least for the first twelve months...⁴³

The instructions were very strict in case of the rebellious zamindars.

Such of the zemindars as, through folly or obstinacy, shall persist in refusing their submission and attempt opposition to your party, you will of course proceed against in a hostile manner, and, employing all advantages that your intelligence or other circumstances may afford you, endeavour to expel them from their dominions. This once effected, the next step, if practicable, will be to appoint other persons to their zemindaries... But if you apprehend the situation of the districts to be such that another person could not maintain himself in them without a force of ours constantly to support him, it will then remain with you as well to inflict a punishment for the obstinacy and rebellion of the present incumbents as to render them incapable of creating further disturbance in time to come; the former by giving the personal property and possessions of such zemindars and their head people up to plunder, the latter by destroying as much possible their refuge and strongholds.⁴⁴

With such instructions, Fergusson set out with three or four company of sepoy to ensure submission of the western jungles on 2nd February, 1767. The first resistance was put up by the zamindar of Jhargram. The expedition had halted at Dherua (19 miles due west from Midnapore) on February 3rd, 1767 and from there summons were sent out to the zamindar of Jhargram. On receipt of evasive replies, the march was resumed and reached the fort on the night of 5th February, 1767. The zamindar fled but later on under threats of destruction of fort and plunder, he unconditionally surrendered. After the demonstration of power at Jhargram, it became easy for Fergusson to settle four other zamindars in the neighbourhood- Jambani,

⁴² Letter from H. Verlest to J. Graham (17th March, 1766), in *Adivasi resistance in Early Colonial India: Comprising the Chuar Rebellion of 1799 by J.C Price and Relevant Midnapore District Collectorate Records from the Eighteenth Century*, ed., Ananda Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Manohar, 2017), 71-72. Also available in Midnapore District Collectorate as Record No.60.

⁴³ Letter from J. Graham to J. Fergusson (30th January, 1767), in *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 38- 39.

⁴⁴ Letter from J.Graham to J.Fergusson (30th January, 1767), in *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 39.

Jhatibani or Silda, Ramgarh, Sankakulia or Lalgarrh.⁴⁵ Other zamindaris settled by Fergusson were Amainagar, Supur, Manbhoom, Chhatna, Barahabhum.⁴⁶

The zamindar of Ghatsila proved to be a huge trouble and a full-fledged battle had to be waged against him to establish control. As Price notes,

The zemindar of Ghatsila proved a more obstinate opponent than his brother of Jhargram. He posted troops in all the avenues and inlets to his pergunnah, and was determined not to admit a Feringhi into his country on any account.⁴⁷

He destroyed the roads and blocked narrow passes by felling trees. Fergusson initially sent messengers but they were stopped on the way. Other zamindars in the area like Jamboni, Jhatibuni /Silda, Kalyanpur who were rivals of the Ghatsila zamindar met Fergusson at Jamboni pledging support. The expedition to Ghatsila commenced mid-March, 1767. The struggle that ensued is known in history as the first Chuar rebellion. The zamindar of Ghatsila surrendered after putting up a tough fight and his nephew was seated in his place who changed his name to Jagannath Dhal and agreed to pay Rs.5500 annually as revenue. Despite this settlement, peace was not established in the area. Resettlement and subjugation had to be carried out in Manbhoom and Chhatna in January 1768. Ghatsila was no exception. Jagannath Dhal fell into arrear and rebelled. Forces were sent again this time under Lieutenant Rooke, later replaced by Captain Charles Morgan, to capture the Raja. Jagannath Dhal was assisted in his rebellion by zamindars of “Chucoolea” (currently Chakulia), “Cochpara” (currently Kokpara) and others.⁴⁸ Letters from those leading the expedition reporting their activities to the Resident keep referring to the rebels as “jungle fellows” who deserve punishment to prevent future rebellions. One such description can be cited to understand the nature of the struggle and why it was so difficult for the English to have a clear-cut win,

They have not the least idea of fighting; they are like a parcel of wasps: they endeavour to sting you with their arrows and then fly off. It is impossible almost to kill any of them, as they always keep at a great distance and fling their arrows at you, which you may suppose, seldom or ever do any execution. As the thing is to frighten these fellows as

⁴⁵ Keith Jameson, “A Forgotten Military Expedition in Bengal”, *The Calcutta Review*, no.293 (July,1918): 245; Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore* 41-42.

⁴⁶ Full narratives of the expeditions and final settlements can be accessed from a series of letter correspondences between John Graham and Ensign Fergusson available in the form of Midnapore District Collectorate (MDC) Record Nos. 109, 117, 118, 120, 124-130, 139, 156-158; between George Vansittart and Fergusson in MDC Record Nos. 171,202,235,246,247,288; between Vansittart and Captain Morgan who had replaced Fergusson in MDC Record No.359,368,373, 374, 376-379,383. All the letters included in these Records provide day to day updates on the military actions and difficulties faced while settling revenues.

⁴⁷ Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*,42.

⁴⁸ Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 56-58.

much as possible ... it will be necessary always to keep that gun in this fort, which I believe will be of more service than an extraordinary company of sepoys...⁴⁹

The district records of Manbhum contain accounts of Chuar outbreaks in different parts. The stronghold of the Chuars lay mainly in the hills between Ghatsila and Barabhum. The geography was conducive for such activities. Accounts can also be traced to the zamindar of Silda. At this stage Warren Hastings adopted the policy of recruiting all able-bodied men in this area into Company's army and by recognising interests in *paikan* lands in this territory. Plunders however kept on continuing and defence measures had to be kept ready to deal with such depredations wherever they occurred. For instance, in 1780 one Rudra Bauri with a hundred of Dhalbhum people plundered the inhabitants of Bishnupur. In 1782 disturbances in Jhalda had to be suppressed and the inhabitants of the area formed by the triangle Jhalda, Pachet and Ramgarh were proposed to be disarmed.⁵⁰

The first settlement with the jungle zamindars was made in 1776. It was a fixed settlement of an easy *peshkash* or quit rent as an acknowledgement of Company sovereignty. Increasing revenue income was not the aim then. The great portion of the lands in the area was held in the form of a feudal tenure. An account of the nature of revenue collected in these jungle zamindaris can be cited here,

It is a jungle; that their rents are a kind of quit-rent collected from their paiks and Chuars; that they are surrounded likewise by jungle zamindars, on the east by Bogree and Bishnupur; on the north Patchet; on the west Singhbhoom; on the south Damudar Bhanja, the Moharbhanj Raja; that all these are more mighty than they, and from whom they frequently suffer depredations, ...⁵¹

In another letter, the Collector wrote

The inhabitants of these zemindaries, being Chuars, are bred up as much for pillaging as cultivating, and pay a kind of quit-rent from the profits of both occupations: they are prompt enough, easily to be shaken from their obedience to Government. It is absolutely necessary a strict hand and short accounts be kept with them; whereas they are now left to themselves, and at full liberty to act as they please, no person in present having charge of them, the Committee having directed me to strike those mehals out of my concerns. I have now mentioned this only with a view to prevent the interest of the Company suffering from a longer delay.⁵²

⁴⁹ Letter from George Rooke to George Vansittart (8th June 1768), in *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 58.

⁵⁰ Shashi Bhushan Chaudhuri, *Civil Disturbances during the British Rule in India, 1765-1857* (Calcutta: World Press, 1955), 65-66.

⁵¹ Letter from the Collector to Warren Hastings, Governor General and Members of the Council (23rd November, 1781) in *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 67.

⁵² Letter from the Collector to Warren Hastings, Governor General and Members of the Council (27th November, 1781) in *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 67-68.

Thus, in the first phase of the Chuar rebellion, we see a common front of the zamindars, their *paik* militia and the jungle tribes against the Company, all of whom were thrown off balance by the new type of state that replaced the customary old one. This part of the resistance is confined mainly to the south-west corner of Bengal with areas bordering and located in the current state of Jharkhand at one end and Mayurbhanj, Odisha on the other. All the official correspondences in the aforesaid account repeatedly mention the Chuars and the paiks. Both the terms are either seen being used interchangeably or together in descriptions on this resistance. Before we proceed to the second phase of the Chuar rebellion, it is necessary to delve into a conceptual clarification to identify the overlaps and divergences of the two identities.

Paiks, Paikan tenures and the Chuars: A Conceptual Clarification

When the British government took over the administration of Midnapore they noticed the existence of a class of men denominated paiks who performed certain services for the zamindars and enjoyed grants of land either free of rent or with a small quit rent called *peshkash*. Generally, the term meant footmen who were local and hereditary watchmen and militiamen. James Grant in his *Analysis of the Finances of Bengal*, 1786 states that in *chaklas* Midnapore and Jaleswar the number of paiks were 8975 and the amount of land held by them was 1,45,591 bighas of which 87,661 paid *peshkash* at the rate of 8 annas per bigha.⁵³

Question automatically arises on the origin of the paiks, their status and the nature of their tenures that created such a problem for the EIC administrators. Such was the confusion regarding their identity that, in 1866 Mr. D.J McNeille (ICS) was put on special duty to investigate the subject of rural police and village watch and he submitted a detailed report on the same. McNeille's theory defined the village watchman of ancient times as an officer maintained by the village community in which he lived. Under the Mughal rule, zamindars were appointed by the state to collect the revenue and conduct civil and criminal administration and a large establishment was placed at their disposal for the purpose. The village communities lost their common character and became collection of individual subjects of the state and as a consequence the watchmen were merged into the zamindari establishment and made to do miscellaneous duties connected with the collection of revenue, while at the same time other classes of the establishment had duties of watch and ward

⁵³ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 91.

imposed on them. During the final years of the Mughal rule the zamindars no longer remained simply officers of government but acquired an independent interest in the lands of their estates and this was recognised as a proprietary right at the time of the Decennial Settlement. Before the Decennial Settlement and for three years after it the whole police administration of the country was left in their hands and they were held responsible for the prevention of theft and dacoity, the apprehension of criminals and restoration of stolen property. No separate police force was maintained by the state and the zamindars continued to be police authorities. The double character thus acquired by the zamindars was also replicated in other establishments who were employed both in police duties and in services rendered to the zamindars in their new capacity of land holders.⁵⁴

Jameson however cites such explanation as an undue simplification of the paikan identity. The village community according to Jameson existed long before the idea of a state arose and it was an independent self-supporting and self-sufficing unit. When the idea of state took shape, it was superimposed on these independent units. The only relation the state had with these communities lay in the fact that it demanded tribute from them and as long as the tribute was paid, there was minimum interference with the latter's internal economy which continued to regulate their own concerns. The provision of watch and ward was one of the most important concerns. These watch and wards cannot be referred to as official servants of the state as McNeillie noted. With the establishment of the centralised control of the Mughals, the structure of the society underwent a change and as the central government grew in power and authority, its range of activities widened and many of the functions formally carried out by the communities themselves went into the sphere of action of the central power and were executed by officials appointed from above. J.C Price in his account states that when the office of the *kanungo* was established, Todar Mal appointed *sirdars* with police functions whose role was to prevent depredations and keep refractory zamindars in check. These *sirdars* had a proper force of paiks under their control and for their maintenance certain amount of lands were assigned from eight parganas as jagirs under the denomination of *Bomjan* and *Baitaki*.⁵⁵ At the same time given the growing complexity of organisation, many older roles and functions were retained in their original forms. The fact appears that while the central government did appoint certain of the more important officials subordinate to the zamindar like the *diwan* or the *kanungo* and probably the superior police officers like the

⁵⁴ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 96-97.

⁵⁵ Price, *Notes on the History of Midnapore*, 68.

thanadar whose functions extended over a wider area than a single village, it did not concern itself with the inferior staff. Thus, those concerned with the execution of various former functions like the village watchman, initially appointed by and held allegiance to the village community were transferred to the individual zamindar and became his servants.⁵⁶

Now we can turn to the special nature of the *paiks* of Midnapore district. From the general account of the district, we are already aware of the fundamental physical, demographical and cultural difference between the jungle dominated western half and the alluvial eastern half of the district. The jungle *Rajas* who were located mainly in frontier locations share common features with border chieftains across areas and times all over the world. To these rulers fighting was the normal state of existence and peace was a mere interlude. Even if any particular ruler was not predatory in nature, he did not have the sense of security from his next-door neighbour and had to be perpetually ready to defend his property and the lives of his dependents. As Jameson notes in most cases the bulk of the tenantry would join him in his fight at their own free will, because their own positions were at stake from such attacks but it was essential for such rulers to maintain a nucleus of retainers who could be called on and compelled to obey the summons against such attacks. Thus, the requirement of paid fighting men arose and as currency in those days was not common it was natural that the remuneration would take the form of grants of land free of rent and in some cases at purely nominal rent for their services.⁵⁷ It was the resumption of these *paik jagir* that kindled the flame of rebellion in the district. Similarity can be drawn with the *paiks* of Orissa as well who were a mere fighting force and Midnapore originally formed part of Orissa. Jameson in his report makes a clear distinction between the *paiks* and the *Chuars* where he terms the latter as ‘inhabitants of the jungle’.⁵⁸

Thus, the *paiks* had their position as a servant of the zamindar. They performed the duties other than fighting as well. During periods of peace, internal order had to be maintained and such functions were assigned to the same people as the jungle chieftains neither had the resources nor the finances for maintaining a separate establishment. We already know that the border chiefs were never effectively incorporated in the Mughal empire. During the 23 years between Ferguson’s expedition and the Decennial Settlement all these border chiefs were repressed and order was imposed on them. They were made responsible for preservation of

⁵⁶ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 97-98.

⁵⁷ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 101.

⁵⁸ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 102.

peace and suppression of crime within their estates and it was only natural that they would employ the paiks in this new role.

When the Regulation of 1793 (Permanent Settlement) was promulgated, the paikan lands situated in parganas settled after the enactment were protected from resumption by the government but those in parganas settled before 1793 or such lands situated in a zamindari but not paying quit rent were liable to be resumed by government under the Regulation I.⁵⁹ By Clause 4, Section 8 of Regulation 1 of 1793, it was declared that the Governor General - in-Council reserved to himself the right to resume the whole or any part of such lands. Acting in accordance with this Mr. Dowdeswell, the Collector in 1793 began to resume the lands of the Midnapore paiks which he considered to fall within the description of the lands excluded under the section and resumption of 54866 bighas was completed out of a total of 1,00,049 bighas of paikan land in the district. The principal adopted in making the settlement was to confirm the paiks in possession of their land and assess rent at such rates that would leave them a handsome provision for their subsistence. From the rent thus obtained 10% collection charges, 10% *moshaira*⁶⁰ and the *peshkash*, if any, was deducted and the balance was the revenue payable by the zamindar. The greatest bulk of resumptions were in the Midnapore estate. The total number of rights abolished was 1528. In 1796 Mr Stonehouse, the then Collector, abolished 1498 more and resumed their lands amounting to 22265 bighas of which Rs 4610 was assessed as revenue.⁶¹ This was set aside later on after the chaos caused by the 1799 resistance by the paiks who considering such resumptions as an encroachment on their ancient rights and privileges resisted in a violent way and disrupted administration over a large area.

Jameson here cites an interesting remark made by an official in 1841,

Jagheer land appears to be associated in the native mind with a certain degree of rank, for I have remarked that an almost naked paik is as proud in the possession of his 10 bighas (albeit half waste) as one may imagine the Begum Sumroo to have been in that of her princely domain. These prejudices cannot be combated by word although, they will be speedily eradicated if disregarded. The well and regularly paid policeman will shortly smile at the folly with which he therefore protested against the introduction of a system the operation of which gave him a daily and substantial dinner in exchange for the imaginary dignity which attached to him as a half-starved Jagheerदार.⁶²

⁵⁹ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 98.

⁶⁰ Derived from Bengali word *mashohara* meaning due monthly share or allowance.

⁶¹ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 92.

⁶² Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 92.

If the ethnic and caste composition of the paiks is to be noted, the youths of Rajhorh, Majhi, Bagdi, Bauri, Lodha-Sabar, Bhumij, Munda, Santal, Kurmi, Bagal, Mal, Kheria etc castes and tribes were the principal ones. They were experts in use of lathis, swords, spears, bows and arrows. Five categories of paiks have been identified – those who used lathis (*lethels*), those who used swords and shields (*sirdar* paiks), those who used bows and arrows (*dhanua* paiks), those who had guns (*banua* paiks) and those who used long wooden legs/ stilt legs (for swift movement and message delivery (*ronpa* paiks). The paiks used to wear weird dresses, headgears, animal masks and their overall body language was different and aggressive.⁶³ Another author provides a threefold categorisation of paikan militia: *paharis* carrying large shields and *khanda* (swords) to guard the fortress; *banua* who used match-locks and *dhenkira* who had some match-locks but depended mainly on bows, poisonous arrows and *khanda* swords.⁶⁴

Now we turn to the identity of Chuars. B.B Chaudhuri notes that the term which the colonial administration used to describe the rebels was borrowed from the Bengali word ‘*chuars*’ meaning wild, ferocious and ill mannered.⁶⁵ The tribals living in the Junglemahals were commonly referred to as Chuars since the medieval period. Sri Chaitanya in 1509 is noted to have described these communities as “pirates gathered on the rivers, and robbers on the land.”⁶⁶ O’ Malley also notes that the term Chuars in Bengali means savage and was applied to the Bhumij and other aboriginal tribes of Bankura, Midnapore and Manbhum.⁶⁷ In the Midnapore- Jhargram – Purulia – Bankura belt, those who do not conform to the standards of the so called ‘civilised’ society are referred to as Chuars- a term born out of contempt. An example from literature can be provided here. In Poet Kobi Kankan Mukundaram Chakraborty’s *Chandimangal*, the tribal *sirdar* while introducing himself says: ‘অতি নীচ কুলে জনম, জাতিতে চোয়াড়, কেহ না পরশ করে, লোকে বলে রাড়’ (in essence meaning ‘I am a low born, untouchable person, Chuar by caste’).⁶⁸ The ethnic groups of south-west Bengal who

⁶³ Madhup De, *Rajdrohi Rani Shiromani* (Medinipur: Boipattar, 2022), 44-45.

⁶⁴ Binod S. Das, “Chuar Revolt in the Frontier Bengal 1760-1833”, in *Agrarian Bengal under the Raj*, ed. Chittabrata Palit (Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2012), 63.

⁶⁵ For details see B.B Chaudhuri, “Towards an Understanding of the tribal World of Colonial Eastern India” in *Narratives from the Margins: Aspects of Adivasi History in India*, eds., Sanjukta Dasgupta and Rajsekhar Basu (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2014), 47-75.

⁶⁶ O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, p. 22.

⁶⁷ L.S.S O’Malley, *History of Bengal Bihar and Orissa* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1925), 289-300.

⁶⁸ Madhup De, *Rajdrohi Rani Shiromani*, 46.

came to share this denomination generally belonged to Kurmi, Santal, Bhumij, Bauri, Kora, Mahli, Goalas, Munda and Manki of Chota Nagpur and Sardar Ghatwals.

Hunters notes the following as the aboriginals and hill tribes of the Midnapore district – Bhars, Bhumij, Gonds, Kharias, Kharwars, Kols, Nats, Puraons, Sabars, Santals, Dhangars or Uraons.⁶⁹ Thus, all the lower castes and mainly the tribals can be seen carrying this identity demarcation as Chuars. Some trace the derivative meaning of the term to the lower caste people living in the hilly region or rats of the hilly region who eat away harvests of the plain (chua + arha =chuar – Kabi Kankan Chandi).⁷⁰

Positive narratives refer to the Chuars as peasantised tribals of frontier Bengal. Suprakash Ray described the resistance as a peasant - adivasi led resistance in colonial India. The insurgency with mobile guerrilla forces were motivated, organised and geared towards ending exploitation.⁷¹

The tribals (predominantly forest communities) were preferred as recruits of the armies (paiks) of the local chiefs due to their physical fitness. Lower castes of Hindu caste hierarchy and outcastes were also engaged in this role. As we know, the paiks received grants in land and hence were either cultivator themselves in peacetime or used the services of others in cultivation creating an indirect relationship of dependence- a privilege which they lost under British regime. These tribals and lower castes were also involved in plunder and loot either due to absence of means of subsistence or driven by motives of gain. It is in the category of ethnic and caste configuration that the Chuar and paik identities tend to merge which in turn merges with the peasant identity. Hence when the paikan jagirs when resumed, all the three identities aligned in resistance against the state.

Chuar Rebellion: Phase II

This phase of the Chuar rebellion can be attributed to the promulgation of the Decennial Settlement followed by the Permanent Settlement. The adverse effect of the Permanent Settlement on the zamindars, the resumption of service tenures of paiks along with the

⁶⁹ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol 3, 51. Spellings used by Hunter unchanged.

⁷⁰ As cited in Binod S. Das, “Chuar Revolt in the Frontier Bengal”, 88.

⁷¹ Suprakash Ray, *Bharater Krishak Bidraha o Ganatantrik Sangram* (Kolkata: Radical, 2012), 55-56.

replacement of their police functions by others directly appointed by the Company,⁷² the loss of livelihood of peasants who cultivated the service tenured lands- all coincided creating a common cause for all the stakeholders to revolt violently against the Company.

The main problem that arose immediately post Permanent Settlement was the amount of assessment fixed for perpetuity and the sale of the zamindari estates for arrears in revenue payment. This sale law was referred to as the Sunset Law i.e., if the zamindar did not pay his dues by sunset of the date specified for payment, his or her zamindari was auctioned off. Meeting arrears were particularly problematic during a year of scarcity and relief provisions in those cases were absent in the Settlement framework. In the pre-British set up, punitive measures were in place for defaulters. Either the defaulter or his representative was imprisoned or the estate was temporarily leased out. Even if replaced, it was done by members of the same family thereby preserving the hereditary ties as well as the local connections. Public auction for arrears to outsiders destroyed many traditional houses triggering resistances. One major effect of the Settlement was disintegration of zamindari estates piecemeal. As years progressed, the traditional zamindaris broke up into estates and many were even dismantled or amalgamated with other zamindaris. For instance, the largest zamindari of the district – the Kashijora Raj- declined to accept either the new assessment or pay the old *jama*. The Collector in 1776 divided parganas into *huddas* (unit of collection) and the *huddas* into villages and appointed *patwaris* responsible only to the Company. Soon the two parganas of Kashijora and Shahpur were divided into 50 lots and the Collector sold the zamindari. The entire estate of Kasijora was dismembered piecemeal over time until the zamindar was left with not an acre of revenue paying land.⁷³

In the late 18th century 2/3rds of Midnapore comprised of jungles and given the agrarian composition it was difficult to realise revenues. Customary allegiances prevailed. Many of the zamindaris failed to pay the increased assessments of revenue like Raipur, Pachet, Midnapore and Narajol. Many of the defaulting zamindars were arrested for arrears, their estates declared *khas* and put up for auction. It was the confiscation of Raipur zamindari of Durjan Singh and Midnapore zamindari of Rani Shiromani that ignited this phase of the

⁷² Regulation I of December 7, 1792 as well as those of 22nd and 23rd May, 1793 formed the basis of new police administration. In place of the paiks, officers directly appointed by Company came in for maintenance of law and order. The landlords were required to disband their own police establishments and a new tax for maintenance of police was imposed.

⁷³ Panda, *The Decline of the Bengal Zamindars: Midnapore*, 13, 17.

rebellion. Public sentiment in favour of a victimised widow whose zamindari was let out and brought under Company management became the primary catalyst.

Before highlighting the nature of the second phase, a short discussion on the Midnapore zamindari can be attempted in this context. In Todar Mal's revenue divisions and *Dahsala* arrangements, the Karnagarh Raj has been referred to as the Midnapore *mahal* or Midnapore zamindari. The ancestral records trace Karnagarh zamindari lineage to 1586 and name Laxman Sing, belonging to the Sadgop caste, as the founder.⁷⁴ On the question of who ruled over these territories prior to Laxman Singh, many opinions prevail. However there seems to be a general agreement that the ruling lineage may have been from the tribal community, the last of whom Surat Sing was murdered by Laxman Sing to acquire territory. As per records maintained in Puri's Jagannath temple, it can be noted that Orissa was divided into 31 *dandapats*. Of these 31, one was named Bhanjabhum-Baripada *dandapat*. The major portions of this region extending from Salbani to Baripada was covered in dense jungles. Salbani, Midnapore, Keshpur, Kharagpur, Keshiary, Nayagram, Binpur, Jhargram, Gopiballavpur and Mayurbhanj's Baripada were all part of this *dandapat*. All these areas were ruled by tribal leaders.⁷⁵ The Midnapore zamindari area was believed to be under a Bhumij/ Bhanja ruler and hence the term Bhanjabhum can be associated with this zamindari in ancient times. After the Bhumij rulers, the area was ruled by the *Khaira Majhis*, another tribal group, Surat Sing being its last ruler.⁷⁶

We can use Raja Mohendra Lal Khan's description here,

It (The Midnapore Raj) is also called Bhanjabhum, after the name of the largest pargana which constitute the estate. The name Bhanjabhum is derived from the word Bhanja, the name of a subdivision of the jangali tribe of Bhumej. The bhumej Rajahs were the original proprietors of the Parganah or Banjabhum. After them it came into the possession of Kharra Magi (a jangli tribe). Surat Singh was the last of this line. In his time, it was a feudatory state under Mukunda Deb, the King of Orissa.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Basu, *Medinipurer Itihas*, 409.

⁷⁵ Madhup De, *Rajdrohi Rani Shiromani*, 19-20.

⁷⁶ Regarding Khaira Majhi one point needs special mention here. This sub-group is considered to be one (Khaira/Kheria Sabar) out of two of the broad tribal group of Sabar, the other one being Lodha Sabar. In present times, this Sabar community is considered to be the most endangered one in the entire Junglemahals.)

⁷⁷ Rajah Mohendro Lall Khan, Zemindar of Midnapore and Narajole, *The History of the Midnapore Raj* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1889), 23. Similar descriptions are available in other sources as well. H.V Bayley notes that "the Midnapore Estate contains now the parganas Bahadurpur, Dhekiabazar, Bhunjabhum which includes Monohargarh. Most of this estate and all Narayangarh, Balarampur, Kedar and Kharagpur, all belonged to one man called the Khaira Raja (a jungle caste). One of the forefathers of Ujeet Singh (read Ajit

From the 14th century onwards, *Dhupas*, *Bagdis*, *Mals*, *Bhuiyas*, *Sabars* etc ruled over these jungle areas. Many of them prepared ancestral rolls with the help of Brahmins attached to their deities and claimed Kshatriya / Rajput status in their stories. In many other cases, these tribal or lower caste rulers were ousted by outsiders, who adopted the local folk/tribal deities as their own. For instance, in Chilkigarh the Sabar ruler was defeated and ousted by Tripathi Brahmins. In Jhargram region the Mals were defeated by the ancestors of the current zamindar family who adopted the title Malladeb.⁷⁸

Though the discussion in the earlier part seems to be digressing from a direct account of the Chuar rebellion, it is however necessary to understand the local dynamics that holds relevant even today. The transition for the tribals and the lower castes from ruling class to the lowest class in the social hierarchy is quite huge and is bound to generate a sense of alienation and frustration ready to flare on under different circumstances.

Moving back to the Midnapore Raj, one point to be noted here is that the zamindar was a *faujdar* of the Nawab of Bengal. This status was received during the tenure of Raja Ram Sing (1693-1711) and 12000 soldiers of the Nawab of Bengal were stationed here. These soldiers were also entitled to the paikan and ghatwali jagirs.⁷⁹ With the fall of the Bengal Nawab, these soldiers were disbanded many of whom joined the paiks in their revolt.

When Shiromani came into the scene in 1755, the twilight of Mughal rule in Delhi and Bengal had set in with law and order in total disarray. The Marathas were already wreaking

Singh) of Midnapore was his dewan; the Balarampur people his *garhsardar* and the Naraingarh people the deputy of the preceding. These conspired and slew their master, and divided the whole of his property". See Bayley, *Memoranda of Midnapore*, 1852, 17; L.S.S O Malley while writing about Balarampur notes, "according to tradition, it belonged originally to a Khaira Raja, who was murdered by three of his officers and Balarampur fell to his Garh Sardar. See O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer-Midnapore*, 166.

⁷⁸In this context a very interesting work by Ranabir Samaddar on Chilkigarh /Jamboni zamindari deserves special mention. In his 1998 work, he uses records of the royal priest Shambhunath Sarangi and estate official Kashinath Dhal to trace the cultural history of a widely worshipped deity in Jhargram region – 'Kanakdurga' attached to the Chilkigarh zamindari family and comments on how the tribal god, Ronkini/Rankini became 'civilized'. From this work we can also trace a connection between this zamindari and that of Dhalbhumgarh-Ghatsila zamindari of Jagannath Dhal, the lead rebel in the first phase of Chuar uprising. From Kashinath's account Samaddar notes that Jagat Singha, the founder of the Dhabaldebs, had come from the Deccan in 638 B.S (Bengali year), defeated a local Bhumij/Munda chieftain by the name of Narayan Patar and became lord of 52 mauzas. After visiting Puri's Jagannath temple and receiving his blessings, he acquired the name Jagannath Dhabaldeb and being the zamindar of Dhalbhumgarh area, the name that became common was Jagannath Dhal. For details see Ranabir Samaddar, *Memory, Identity, Power: Politics in the Junglemehals 1890-1950*, 2nd Edition (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013), 30-61; Even Benoy Ghosh in his work *Paschim Banger Sanskriti*, Calcutta: Pustak Prakashak, 1959) talks about similar tales of 'sanskritization' of a forest goddess into Kanakdurga. The Kanakdurga of today may appear to be an aristocratic goddess but actually is a version of the old forest goddess associated with names like Bhairabi, Rankini, Kaminya, Pretini, Bandurga worshipped by the masses in the forest regions which later on became deities under patronage of these feudatory princes.

⁷⁹Madhup De, *Rajdrohi Rani Shiromani* ,32-33.

havoc and taking advantage of the situation, looting by a section of paiks -Chuars had increased. In such a condition, a young widow in charge of the largest zamindari in the area was an exceptional phenomenon. In the initial days, she failed to control the activities of the paiks. The most famous paik sirdar (leader) in the region was Gobardhan Dikpati of the Bagdi caste. His activities extended from Raipur to Silda and Bogri – the entire north western forest area. With the news of a female in charge, he attacked and looted Karnagarh in 1758. The Rani sought assistance of Trilochan Khan, zamindar of Narajole (first maternal cousin of Raja Jaswant Sing, father -in-law of Rani Shiromani). The Rani entered into an agreement making the Narajole zamindar, the manager of the Midnapore estates for lifetime.⁸⁰

After this episode, the Rani tried to muster control over her zamindari. She gained confidence of her paiks and subjects at large. In the meanwhile, the Company gained control over Midnapore in 1760 and over Bengal in 1765. They brought all lands under the purview of revenue administration and also introduced payment of revenue using currency (*Alla Sicca*) instead of farm produce/crops. When the armed pacification of the Junglemahals under Fergusson was being planned, he had asked for *paik* forces from Midnapore and Dharinda zamindaris in 1766. The Rani had agreed to provide such help in exchange of payment for the soldiers. The English were offended by this and the mission did not materialize. However, in 1767 she provided such assistance (500-foot soldiers and 50 horsemen) when asked for the second time. However, the Company refused to pay for such assistance which offended the Rani. In November 1767, the English increased the revenues of Midnapore and Narajole. For Midnapore, the revenue increase was from Rs.40120/- 2Annas to 71690/- 6 Annas. As she was unable to pay the increased amount, all her possessions were declared *khas* excluding *debottar* and *chakaran* land. Though they were recovered after negotiations with the Company, the Rani started to look for ways to oppose the British. She found her inspiration in the activities of Jagannath Dhal of Ghatsila in the first phase of Chuar resistances. Till 1782, the Midnapore zamindari somehow managed to pay the revenues. In 1783, the revenue demand was increased to 1,11,797 rupees 8 annas 8 paisa.⁸¹ This time the Rani denied payment of such exorbitant amount. In 1781, a person named Rammohan Roy designated by the Company to collect revenue was killed by the Chuar-paiks, Shiromani's *diwan* Banccharam Bakshi and *naib* /manager Sitaram Khan were arrested by the Company. The

⁸⁰ Khan, *The History of the Midnapore Raj*, 3-4.

⁸¹ Khan, *The History of the Midnapore Raj*, 4.

Rani opposed such arrests and they were released for lack of evidence.⁸² After this incident, she gained the confidence of the Chuar-paiks. After the death of Sitaram Khan, his eldest son Ananda Lal Khan became the manager of Midnapore zamindari. In 1785 because of non-payment of revenue dues of Midnapore and Narajole, Ananda Lal Khan was arrested by the Collector of Midnapore.⁸³ He was released in 1786 and entered into an agreement with the Company. The Company had declared that the revenue must be paid in *Alla Sicca* currency but such currency was available only with the rich mahajans and getting access to it currency was economically ruinous for the zamindars. In his agreement with the Company, Anandalal paid Narajole's revenue in Company currency.⁸⁴

Though Ananda Lal Khan negotiated with the Company, Shiromani did not. In the Decennial Settlement of 1790, the revenue demand was increased again. Midnapore was already in arrear since 1783. Even Narajole failed and both properties were declared *khas*.⁸⁵ Though the Rani's zamindari was declared *khas*, the Company could not gain possession and all landed interests stayed intact. Even when the zamindari was declared on auction, no one dared to purchase the rights.

The Rani in her attitude towards the Company maintained a duality. She tacitly supported the paiks while maintaining a pro -Company image. Ananda Lal Khan did not support this attitude and left for Narajole leaving his managerial duties. However, his paternal uncle, Chunilal Khan filled in for the role. This Shiromani-Chunilal duo became the face of the second Chuar rebellion. It was declared that whoever sets foot in Rani's zamindari to collect revenue or any raiyat who paid revenue to the English will be murdered. The English were suspicious of the Rani but could not collect enough evidence. The Rani used her early bitter experience with the Chuars as a precedent while answering the Company, when accused of supporting the rebels. In 1797 she also tried to unite all the zamindars of the area in this struggle by inviting them to the annual festivities of Maa Mahamaya (the family deity of zamindari) but the collector of Midnapore disrupted that attempt.

In 1798 Raipur became the starting point of violent resistance of this second phase of Chuar rebellion. When the zamindar there named Durjan Singh failed to pay revenue on time, his

⁸²Narendra Nath Das, *History of Midnapore: Political (1760-1803)*, Vol 1(Midnapore: Medinipur Itihas Rachana Samity, 1972) ,107.

⁸³Das, *History of Midnapore* ,111.

⁸⁴ Khan, *The History of the Midnapore Raj*, 4.

⁸⁵ Khan, *The History of the Midnapore Raj*, 4.

zamindari was auctioned off in 1794 at a higher rate. On his appeal and leadership, the rebels disposed the new zamindar and captured Raipur in 1798. They went on capturing villages and all the new raiyats settled by the new zamindar were attacked and dispossessed. The zamindari staff and the thanadar fled to Midnapore and so did the raiyats. In many areas *naibs* and *telsildars* were murdered. As Price notes, the zamindari of Birbhum was overran by the rebels in such a manner that not a rupee of revenue could be collected.⁸⁶ The Chuar leader was Gobardhan Dikpati of Bogri pargana who attacked and burned villages overnight with his band of followers. The zamindari of pargana Bogri had also been auctioned off for revenue arrears but the new purchaser Kanak Singh allowed all his paiks to join the bands of Gobardhan who was also allowed to use the paikan lands. He was instrumental in sacking Anandpur village in the vicinity of Midnapore raising terror in the administration. There were other groups plundering villages in the vicinity of Midnapore. Price in his account talks about a “body of robbers plundering the villages all round within the radius of a *cos*⁸⁷ from the town” who were supported by the manager of the Jhargram estate (the zamindar was a minor) and the refuge of these robbers were within the estate lands where they retired after bloodshed with the collected booty.⁸⁸ The 1799 phase also saw paiks from the neighbouring Mahratta zamindaris of Orissa joining the rebels, increasing troubles. The peasants in many places joined the rebels and stopped paying revenues. With regards to the zamindars supporting Chuars, Price noted that “the zemindars would neither supply provisions nor give intelligence regarding the Chuars, whom they really befriended and lodged in their mud forts”⁸⁹

Price’ account mentions disturbances in Silda, Raipur, Ramgarh, Pachet, Bagri, Nayabasan, Barajit, Jaleswar, Satpati, Rajgarh, Salboni, Nayagram, Balarampur, Gopiballavpur, Dharendra, Narayangarh to name a few, apart from the vicinity of Midnapore town. Near Midnapore town, the main flash points were Bahadurpore, Salbani and Karnagarh bazaars. There were other disturbances in places far removed from the jungle tracts of the district which was inspired by the spirit of rebellion like in Kashijora, Basudevpur (Tamluk), Patashpur, Kamarda,⁹⁰ Such was the situation that revenues were damaged and cultivation

⁸⁶ J.C Price, “The Chuar Rebellion of 1799”, in *Adivasi resistance in Early Colonial India*, ed., Bhattacharya, 14. The monograph was first published in 1874.

⁸⁷ A measure of distance. 1 Cos = 2-Mile, 1 Mile= 1.6 kilometre; 1 Cos =3.2 Kilometre.

⁸⁸ Price, “The Chuar Rebellion of 1799”, 11.

⁸⁹ Price, “The Chuar Rebellion of 1799”, 2.

⁹⁰ Price, “The Chuar Rebellion of 1799”, 41-45.

totally stopped at various locations because the raiyats fled to escape chaos, as they were facing plunder both by the Chuars and the sepoys who were sent to repel the former. Villages were looted even in broad daylight and ripe paddy was cut off from fields in many places. Such was the level of disturbance that all revenue collections in the area came to a halt. The rebels used guerrilla tactics for attacks. As the opposition was between guns on one hand and *lathis*, bows and arrows on the other, this was the only fruitful tactic. Also, another tactic used by the Chuars to cripple military resources can be cited here. They threatened death to anyone who supplied the sepoys with provisions and declared that they were authorised to do so by Rani Shiromani.⁹¹ Though she denied, it became clear to the administration that was a decoy. The Commanding Officer was instructed to capture the forts of Karnagarh and Abashgarh on April 6, 1799 and both Shiromani and Chunilal were arrested.

In citing the cause of the rebellion Price stated in his account,

I think I have the best grounds for believing that the order for the resumption of the paik jaghir lands in the zemindari of the Rani of Midnapore, promulgated several years before, and carried out to some extent later, to the extreme dissatisfaction of both zemindars and paiks, gave a decided impetus to the movement by enlisting on the side of the Chuars a large body of discontented and starving paiks, who saw no other means of gaining a livelihood than by entering upon a career of rapine and pillage.⁹²

With military action going on at one end, the government started delving on the solution to the problem at hand. Realisation had dawned that the main reason of the entire disturbance was resumption of paikan lands and curtailment of police functions. Orders were given for initiation of immediate measures for restoring land to the parties who formerly held them either by re-annexing them to the estate of the zamindar (in case they had been separated earlier) with moderate assessment or by forming a fixed settlement with the *paiks* or other persons who may have formerly held the lands on equitable terms, to ensure future good conduct and tranquility in the district. Also, the police function was to be handed back to the zamindars. It was recommended that the thanadars, sirdars and paiks should be appointed by the zamindars and approved by the Magistrate. The *Haris*, *Bagdis* and all people of low castes or desperate conditions, not employed by the government, should be registered on village basis and placed under superintendence of particular sirdars who were to be made answerable.

⁹¹Price, "The Chuar Rebellion of 1799", 11.

⁹² Price, "The Chuar Rebellion of 1799", 18.

Offensive weapons were to be allowed with permission of Magistrate.⁹³ Guidelines were issued to the zamindars regarding their conduct in relation to police functions and maintenance of peace. The sirdar paiks involved in the rebellion were pardoned and they were used to round up the ordinary Chuars. Even the zamindars were instructed to do so.

The question regarding resumption was kept under wraps till 1828 after which deliberations were resumed. Order was passed that registers should be prepared showing the number of paiks and the amount of land held by them in each village. In 1831 the Collector had supplied an abstract statement stating that there were 1,12,089 bighas of land held by paiks of which 57,653 had been resumed mostly in the Midnapore estate and out of the balance 54,436 bighas, 22776 were in possession of persons classed as purely zamindari servants not engaged in any police work. These figures did not include the Junglemahals which was then part of a separate district. In 1854, Mr. Ricketts, member of the Board of Revenue proposed piecemeal resumption of paikan lands on the death of each incumbent, or making amicable arrangements with the paiks to pay half the assessment of his own life and that of his next heir, after which full assessment was to be demanded. The proposal was accepted by government and officials were appointed to demarcate the lands in 1857 which was completed in 1858.⁹⁴ The main confusion that the government faced was on the question of legality of resumptions. One group was in favour of resumption under Regulation I of 1793 but the government decided against it given the prior impact of such resumptions. The confusion was related to the question of categorisation of paikan lands under police lands resumable by government or chakaran/service lands to be annexed to malguzari lands and assessed as part of zamindari estates.⁹⁵

Detailed and complex deliberations were carried out regarding this after the passage of Chaukidari Act VI of 1870. In 1899 clarification was issued regarding the term chaukidars. Two main classes were differentiated – chaukidars proper locally known as *rangasti* paiks whose duties consisted of round duties in the village and *belagasti* paiks engaged in

⁹³ Price, "The Chuar Rebellion of 1799", 27-30.

⁹⁴ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 93-94

⁹⁵ When the zamindars were relieved of the police functions, all lands assigned for maintenance of police force became resumable under Section 8 of Regulation I of 1793. The government was however aware of the distinction between the superior police force operating over large areas and the inferior class of village watchmen and miscellaneous staff whose activities were confined with one village or maximum to two adjoining villages. The right to complete resumption was applied to the former case while the second case was dubbed as chakaran or service lands responsible for public revenue in common with malguzari lands of whole estates under Section 41, Regulation VIII of 1793.

miscellaneous duties. In 1900 it was instructed that the lands of the latter class should be resumed and settled with zamindars. A balance was maintained regarding assessments. It was decided that the half of the assessment made on such lands should go to the zamindar and half to the government for payment of cash wages to the persons appointed to perform duties formerly discharged by grantees of the land.⁹⁶ All resumptions since 1900 were carried out on these lines.

Government accounts on the Chuar rebellion stop at 1800. Price's monograph on Chuar rebellion has no records after January, 1800. This does not however mean that peace returned in the area. O' Malley however notes that, the frontier tracts were pacified and in 1805 formed into a separate district called Junglemahals under a magistrate with headquarters at Bankura. However discontent resurfaced in the form of Naik rebellion of 1806, the Bhumij revolt under Ganga Narain who had been disposed of the Barabhum estate in Manbhum. The Bhumij uprising followed by the Kols led to the dissolution of the district of Junglemahals to be replaced by district of Manbhum. The new district along with the rest of Chota Nagpur was placed under an officer styled as the Agent of South-West Frontier.⁹⁷ The entire Chota Nagpur region once again rose in revolt in 1855 as the famous Santal Hul bringing the agenda of tribal exploitation in the forefront and destabilising the Company administration.

Culture and Resistance: A Brief Note

Resistances and its effect on local culture is an established fact. Any kind of mobilisation and spread of consciousness, especially in remote areas, is not possible without its cultural dimension. *Bhadu-tusu* performances in villages of these areas even today talks about the tales of bravery of Sidhu-Kanhu, Birsha Munda and the Chuars. One such song can be cited here:

এই মাটির চুয়ার গোঁয়ার বীর,
তারা ধরিল টাঙ্গি ধনুক তীর ।

⁹⁶Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 101.

⁹⁷O' Malley, *History of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa*, 684. 1830s marked the transformation of tribal protests from local resistance to general insurgency. In 1831, Maharaja Kunwar Harnath Singh, a local zamindar arbitrarily dispossessed the tribals (Kols and Mundas) from twelve villages and gave them to Sikhs and Muslims. In 1832, in Barabhum there was a disputed succession issue where the courts decided that the eldest born of the second wife of Raja Vivika Narain should succeed to the zamindari in place of the son of the first wife. The insurrections that marked these two events – the Kol insurrection of 1831 and the Bhumij (or Ganga Narain's) revolt or 'hungama' (title of J.C Jha's famous work) became important events in the history of tribal resistance in India.

রক্ত দিয়েছিল বুক পেতে তারা,
 মানে নি ইংরেজের নতুন ধারা।
 সেদিনের যত ভদ্র বাবু উঁচুজাত ,
 তারাই কাড়ত মোদের পেটের ভাত।
 কোম্পানির হয়ে দালালী করত তারা,
 কত মরেছিল চুয়ার – বীর যারা ।

(The Chuars of this soil were dogged heroes and they took to arms.

They faced troubles with their chests open and shed their blood and yet did not submit to the new rule
 of the English.

The babus of those days would rob us of our food.

They were the brokers of the Company.

But the ones who died were the chuar heroes)⁹⁸

Another example of folk tradition visible in performances across Midnapore is in poet Rameshwar Bhattacharya's *Shibayan* and *Shib-Songkirtan*. The poet in his work speaks of himself being associated with the Midnapore zamindari during the tenure of Raja Yashwant Sing. *Shibayan* is divided into eight parts or *palas*. The sixth part or *pala* is of special interest here. Various tales associated with Shiva and Parvati are well known across India but in this part the poet locates them in the setting of agrarian Bengal along with its associated difficulties. Lord Shiva here is a poor peasant who has received *patta* (cultivating right) from Lord Indra and cultivates his land using the help of Bhim who is an agricultural labourer. His plough is made of his Trishul. He is poor and because of scarcity at home, his quarrels with Parvati are a daily affair. The *pala* goes on to describe various incidents that form part of daily rural existence.⁹⁹

Samaddar notes that the delineation of Jungle mahals as a frontier region was not just a question of political construction but cultural construction as well. With the advent of the British in the region, a rational legal state was imposed on customary social set up. Located on the margins of a rationally governed province, culture of the colonized have been a strong weapon against the ruling power.¹⁰⁰ If we look at the resistances, we can see magic, religion

⁹⁸This song is one among the many songs collected by Ranabir Samaddar in course of his fieldwork in Jamboni-Chilkigarh area and forms part of the chapter *Festivals and Rites: The Public Script of Domination and Power in his work*. The English translation to the songs has been provided by Partha Chatterjee. See Samaddar, *Memory, Identity, Power*, 213-277.

⁹⁹ Ishanchandra Basu, *Shibayan* (1885) cited in *Rajdrohi Rani Shiromani*, 123-135.

¹⁰⁰ Samaddar, *Memory, Identity, Power*, 213-214.

and folk literatures creating a counter consciousness against the rational rulemaking of the colonial regime. Though this is not within the direct purview of the present work, it becomes imperative to take this factor into consideration if the history of the 'other' has to be understood in totality.

Banditry or Peasant Insurgency?

While analysing the Chuar rebellion, one will face the difficulty of categorising its nature under any single concept. Questions may automatically arise as to whether these rebels were mere robbers or were peasant insurgents. In various accounts the terms used to describe this uprising are varied like pillage, disturbance, *banditti*, *hungama*, massacre etc, especially in the colonial accounts which form the dominant discourse of this resistance.

The opening lines of the widely cited monograph of J.C Price on the Chuar rebellion can be cited here,

1799 is marked in Midnapore annals as the year of the great Chuar rebellion, ghastly with its tale of *horrors* and *massacre*; when all the *evil passions* of the infuriated sirdars and paiks burst forth in a wild attempt to revenge the resumption of their jaghir lands on the Government, if not to compel it to order a complete restoration of them. All the *lawless* tribes of the jungle mehals made common cause with the paiks and carried *slaughter and flame* to every door of the Magistrate's cutcherry. The ordinary police and the military stationed at Midnapore were utterly unable to cope with the *banditti*, as they were called, and a reinforcement of troops had to be dispatched to Midnapore. After a period of the greatest anxiety and suspense, after innumerable and most *brutal murders*, after the death of the Judge- Magistrate himself (previously Collector), who could bear the weight of his charge no longer, and succumbed under the accumulation of his troubles; it was not till the close of the year that the district was restored to a state of only partial tranquillity...

¹⁰¹ (*italics* for emphasis)

In this context, Hobsbawm's works on banditry and social banditry appears significant. Hobsbawm defines a bandit as anyone belonging to a group of men who attack and rob with violence and it ranges from those who 'snatch payrolls at an urban street corner' to 'organised insurgents or guerrillas. In his work he deals essentially with a form of individual or minority rebellion within agrarian societies based on agriculture and pastoral economics and consists largely of peasants and landless labourers ruled, oppressed and exploited by someone else like lords, governments etc.¹⁰² The prefix 'social' when added to bandit refer to those peasant outlaws whom the local power magnets and the state both regard as criminals but who remain within peasant society and are considered by people as heroes or

¹⁰¹Price, "The Chuar Rebellion of 1799",1.

¹⁰²E.J Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969),19-20.

champions.¹⁰³ Though the term social bandit generally does not cover those communities for whom raiding is a part of the normal way of life but there are times where the practices can pass into banditry either in the form of resistance to the rich or foreign conquerors or oppressors or to other forces destroying their traditional order of things.

On the question of circumstances in which such activities flourish, Hobsbawm notes that geography, technology, administration, social and economic structures have a role to play. It is commonplace for them to flourish in remote and inaccessible areas. He categorically states that that frontier areas form the ideal situation for such activities to flourish.¹⁰⁴ Administrative inefficiency and complications are additional favourable factors. Also, banditry is noted to become epidemic in times of crisis. Periodic shortages like harvest failure and other natural crisis, breakdown of administrative and political systems and long-term changes like increase of young population without subsequent increase in livelihood options, rise of new social structures and classes, destruction of set ways of life and conditions like poor soil along with the issue of landlessness are cited as various factors by Hobsbawm that can increase banditry tendencies. It may be the precursor or companion of major social movements like peasant revolutions.¹⁰⁵ The context in which the Chuars and paiks took to revolt have all the aforesaid features.

On the question of identity and social composition, the identity overlap of a peasant/cultivator and a bandit is interesting. The peasants are generally tied to their lands but in crisis major structural changes can affect such status, as noted by Hobsbawm. Various communities for whom raiding provides a regular part of their income combine it with agriculture or pastoralism and hence their banditry occurs during the off season. It is in this context that Hobsbawm refers to the tribal Chuars of Midnapore of the early 19th century. He defines the Chuars as 'agricultural-cum-raiding tribesmen' of the jungle districts in Midnapore.¹⁰⁶ There are also certain groups like ex-servicemen and disbanded soldiers who are more likely to embrace banditry.¹⁰⁷ This feature is noticeable in the second phase of the Chuar rebellion.

¹⁰³Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 17.

¹⁰⁴Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 21.

¹⁰⁵Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 22-23.

¹⁰⁶Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 30-31.

¹⁰⁷Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 33.

On the question of types, Hobsbawm categorises three types of bandits in a peasant society - landlord bandits, peasant bandits and the state bandits.¹⁰⁸ In our case, the landlord bandit and the peasant bandit identities merge into one creating a peculiar overlap. The identity distinction however is not clear, or to use Kaviraj's formulation, is fuzzy. A fuzzy community can be understood as one in which construction of individual or collective identity depends predominantly on a sense of context. Belonging to varying layers of community is not uncommon. In different situations, a person in such traditional communities can identify with religion, caste, occupation, village, region etc as context demands. Such person also has a clear idea of such associations, likeness and differences. On the appropriate occasion, every individual can use cognition to classify any other person he interacts with.¹⁰⁹ In our case, the distinction between landlord bandit and peasant bandit is fuzzy in the sense that the person who was employed as a paik of the landlord is also a cultivator on account of ownership of rent-free tenures. Generally, a landlord bandit is considered a distinct identity at loggerheads with the peasant bandit, but both in terms economic interest and community composition (caste/tribe), in our context the identities merge in common opposition to the Company induced disruptions.

In his 1969 work Hobsbawm identifies three categories of bandits in a peasant society – the Robin Hood styled noble robber, the avengers and the *haiduks*. The Chuars do not fit into the noble robber category. The activities of the Chuars in many instances bear features of the category of avengers given the use of terror and cruelty in actions and the horror they struck in the minds of their target but the maximum resemblance can be noticed with the category of *haiduks*. According to Hobsbawm, the arrival of Christian landowners and Turkish invaders in the 15th century transformed life for the peasants in the mountainous regions and desolate plains of southeast Europe. Among those who were being driven off their farms or were fleeing serfdom there were armed men, prepared for battle. They weren't always inclined to rebel against the government, and in some places, they allied themselves with lords to whom they gave fighters in exchange for status recognition. This kind of banditry is a more significant, organised, and aggressive assault to the authority of the state. Hobsbawm himself claims that there is a similarity between the Indian dacoits and the organisation and operation of *haiduks*. Village guards and destitute peasants (in our case the paiks and Chuars), fled to

¹⁰⁸ E.J Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels; Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press,1959),14.

¹⁰⁹ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press,2010),13-14,56.

the hills to form gangs of outlaws in different parts of India, many of whom have been categorised by the British as criminal castes and tribes subsequently.¹¹⁰

Hobsbawm gave the bandits a relatively small part in the revolution of society. Rather than being ideologists or prophets with ideals or plans for social and political organisation and change, the bandits are activists. Their agenda is primarily focused on defending or re-establishing the status quo or the way things should be. It can transform into genuine revolutionary movements for two reasons: first, when they take the lead in the traditional order's resistance against the forces that threaten to destroy it; and second, when they make an effort to put an end to oppression, exploitation, and subjection in order to fulfil their dream of living in a world free of them. The strongest evidence for this is the dependent coexistence of banditry and significant peasant upheavals, which frequently use it as a springboard. As part of larger movements, it can become one among many mobilization tactics and gain the status of a force that can change society.¹¹¹ He referred to banditry as a primitive form of social agitation belonging to a pre-political framework using the following words,

The rebels here belong to the world of those people who neither write nor read many books- often because they are illiterate, who are rarely known by anybody except their friends, and then often only by nickname, who are normally inarticulate and rarely understood even when they express themselves. They are pre-political people who have not yet found or have only begun to find a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world...

Such rebels, according to him, lack political consciousness. They function in profoundly traditional structures and their strength is inversely proportional to that of organised agrarian revolutionism and socialism or communism.¹¹²

It is in reaction to this argument regarding political consciousness, Ranajit Guha begins his analysis of peasant insurgencies. Given the colonial Indian experience, according to him there was nothing non-political or pre-political about the militant movement of its rural masses. The relationship of dominance and subordination was present even in semi feudal, pre-capitalist conditions and any action undertaken to destroy this relation was a political task. Spontaneity cannot be associated with any movement. Guha observes, in line with Gramsci, that spontaneity has no place in history. The presence of awareness in movements that seem to be unstructured is not acknowledged by movement history. It is assumed that conscious

¹¹⁰ For details of each category see Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 41-76.

¹¹¹ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 24-29.

¹¹² Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels*, 23.

and organised are the same in the sense that they both have well-defined goals, a plan of action, an organised leadership, and ways to reach those goals. Guha says this is where the conceptual difficulty lies.¹¹³

It is true that there are no direct rebel sources in our case. There are no official calls for movement and no petitions. The only original sources are departmental minutes, investigative reports, dispatches on counterinsurgency operations, and administrative papers. There is silence on the opposite side of history. With this shortcoming in mind, we may evaluate the characteristics of the Chuar uprising by applying the general concepts and traits of rebel consciousness throughout the colonial era that Guha outlined, such as negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission, and territoriality.

Negation is about rebel's sense of identity which is constituted negatively in respect to the enemies. They feel discriminated against and hence attempt to turn all signs of authority and subordination upside down. Physical violence against guardians and implementors of law were common in all uprisings.¹¹⁴

Ambiguity relates to the blurring of distinction between crime and resistance /insurgency. Dacoities and disruptive activities which are normally identified as crimes by authorities generally signal commencement of peasant insurrection and are often part of it. Crisis situations like famine, chronic poverty, starvation can push docile people to banditry for survival like the Great Bengal famine did. For many communities, crime in itself becomes livelihood resulting in imposition of the tag of criminal tribes upon them. Guha provides the example of the Lodhas of western Bengal. They were forest people who used to earn their living traditionally as hunters and gatherers of food and fuel from the jungle. They lost these forest rights to the zamindar and the Raj, cutting them off from their principal source of subsistence. History of India under British rule has many instances of those who once defied law as individuals or members of small criminal bands, became initiators or organisers of rural revolt.¹¹⁵ In this aspect of the argument Guha and Hobsbawm treads similar paths. The social content of the offence becomes important in creating the distinction between crime and resistance. Keeping this in mind, it will be a simplification to categorise the Chuars purely as

¹¹³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 5-8.

¹¹⁴ See Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 22-76 for arguments on negation

¹¹⁵ For clear understanding on the feature of ambiguity and blurring distinction between crime and insurgency in the official mind see Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 77-94.

bandits. It must also be noted that various featured acts of banditry like looting, cutting of crops from the fields are evident in modern peasant movements.

Modality is about the common techniques used in resistances. Four methods or forms of struggle which Guha identifies to be commonly prevalent in insurgencies are wrecking, looting, burning and eating. Wrecking involved demolition of symbols of enemy authority, vandalizing villages, official bungalows, *sadar* stations and zamindar cutcherries etc. Wrecking, burning, looting is a feature of modern movements as well. The complex of wrecking, burning and looting together can be compositely named as pillage. It was the sweep and power of pillage that the authorities feared most.¹¹⁶ Accounts on Chuar rebellion are replete with instances of such pillage.

Behaviour patterns during an insurgency are linked to solidarity, imitation, and transmission. According to Guha, solidarity is an essential component of peasant consciousness, and it is rare to find a rebellion that lacks it. It may stem from a feeling of shared caste, class, or ethnic connections brought together by shared goals and pursuits. Consciousness, as in the case of the rebellion under study, falls back on solidarity based on shared economic interests, consanguinity i.e. community and kinship ties, status and geographical contiguity. The sense of belonging to a common lineage as well as to a common habitat – consanguinity and contiguity- limit the territoriality of rebellions¹¹⁷. Chuar rebellion by nature was limited to a specific area because of the special types of interests associated with it. This peculiarity, until recently, made this history alien to the movement history of later periods. Recent focus on the subaltern angle to the study of movements and historical tendency of most radical movements having tribal affinities has renewed scholarly attention to these early period resistances.

Regarding transmission of a movement, Guha notes that each insurrection is viewed by the enemies as a sickness. In this connection, one example from Price's account can be provided,

‘In the beginning of October 500 Chuars assembled in the village of Manbazar, in pergunnah Manbhoom, severely wounded two burkundazes and *infested* the roads....’¹¹⁸
(*italics* for emphasis)

Means of transmission of a rebellion in a pre-literate culture was traditional which the rulers failed to grasp. Aural transmissions like drum beats, horns, conch shells, bells were

¹¹⁶ For full details on various modalities see Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 117-149.

¹¹⁷ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 279.

¹¹⁸ Price, “The Chuar Rebellion of 1799”, 36.

common.¹¹⁹ Though accounts on the Chuar rebellion doesn't have direct references on such modes of transmission, it can safely be assumed that verbal and non-verbal signs were used to coordinate and spread the disturbances.

From the entire aforesaid account, we can understand that the Chuar rebellion was a complex phenomenon. It will be difficult to categorise it solely on the basis of class or caste-tribal affinities and even dub it totally either as peasant insurgency or as a tribal insurgency. It seems to have elements of all in it. The resistance saw cross-class participation as well as caste-tribe joint participation. In the first phase we find zamindars resisting the colonial rule against imposition of revenue administration that was alien to their age-old practices. In this fight against East India Company, the zamindars used their paik militias who were an important part and inherent element of zamindari power structure. This phase of the Chuar rebellion is noticeable in the jungle tracts of Midnapore bordering the current state of Jharkhand on one side and Orissa on the other. The second phase of the resistance saw full initiatives by the paiks, who made common cause with the Chuars in resisting land resumption by the colonial power. They were backed by the zamindars who were losing their estates due to imposition of new revenue administration under the effects of the Permanent Settlement. Thus, there was a cross-class coalition working here. A triad between upper caste and class zamindars who were mainly Sadgops and paiks-Chuars with low caste and tribal affinities like Gobardhan Dikpati who was Bagdi by caste is visible. The role of peasant involvement may somehow appear to be in question but it must be safely noted that the paiks enjoyed land tenures and therefore were linked to cultivation either directly or indirectly. They may have been cultivating their lands themselves or using the services of other cultivators. The second phase of the rebellion may be considered to be a zamindar -paik-Chuars -peasant rebellion, a unique coalition that won't be witnessed in the rebellions to come later on. It carries within it features of both banditry and peasant insurgency and lies somewhere between the two. It cannot be categorised totally in the former as it was not a pre-political action bred by spontaneity or lack of consciousness. It cannot be concluded that the subjects here lacked will. It was a conscious action on the part of the rebels who tried to take back what they thought was rightfully their own. All were united by their common interest in rights to land and its uses. It is true that we do not have evidences in the form of written messages or accounts directly from the rebels as we have in the modern times, but the official

¹¹⁹ For detailed account on various modes of transmission see Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 220-256.

representations on the activities of the rebels can be used to make sense of an existing consciousness however nascent it may seem. All modern movements require their exercise of consciousness creation and mobilisation. Recalling a glorious past of resistance is a fruitful mobilisation tactic, as it appeals to sentiments. Any reference to Midnapore today, in political propaganda or otherwise tends to focus on its revolutionary potential and legacy. Chuar rebellion is invariably a part of that legacy.

Chapter – 3

Agrarian Setting of 20th Century Bengal (1900s-1940s): An Overview of the Rise of the Left, the Road to Tebhaga and the ‘Land to the Tiller’ logic.

The transition from the colonial system of governance to post-colonial democratic form of governance is a narrative which tends to highlight discontinuities but in reality, is built upon a plethora of continuities both in terms of socio-economic conditions as well as systemic responses. In the agrarian setting, land and land rights is one major area where continuities prevailed. As noted from the previous account, efforts to set up effective land revenue systems forced the British to face the land tenure question and the way in which land revenue collection structures intermeshed with land tenures. Resistances that shook Bengal at the verge of independence can be linked causally to the effects of Permanent Settlement, the overall condition of the zamindari system and the state of the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. As late as in 1980 it was claimed that as a result of the Permanent Settlement “the peasant was dispossessed of the land which now became the property of the zamindar...the landlord became landowner. Land was now bourgeois landed property...”¹ Many dubbed the very idea of Permanent Settlement as ‘a case of mistaken identity’.² The legal structure that this Regulation created and the actual practice of the whole institution did not match. As Sugata Bose notes,

Discrepancy between colonial revenue law infused with its particular concept of property and the manner in which land was actually held and operated in Bengal ensured that from the very outset the legal classification of agrarian society was far removed from its working structure.³

Any account of resistances in post-colonial Bengal can be divided into two settings- rural and urban. The distinction however is not watertight and is complementary in nature. For grasping the rural setting that became the breeding ground of massive resistances from 1940s ultimately culminating in the Naxalbari movement, it is first necessary to have an idea of the agrarian

¹ Hamza Alavi, “India: Transition from Feudalism to Colonial Capitalism”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 10, no. 4 (1980): 371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472338085390251>.

² Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, 1760-1850* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979), 73.

³ Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

relations as they evolved post Permanent Settlement and its state in the 20th century that affected all actors, their policies and the ensuing repercussions.

The Nature of the Agrarian Setting and Agrarian Relations

In the mid-1940s at the juncture of India's independence rural Bengal witnessed the first 'consciously attempted revolt by a politicized peasantry'.⁴ Left mobilisation of the masses was the main reason for the outbreak. This directly follows from the nature of the prevailing agrarian relations. Over time, the agrarian hierarchy witnessed one significant change post-Settlement. The power and control of the traditional zamindars and talukdars reduced and in their place a new class of jotedars became dominant. Various authors have provided classifications of the agrarian structure. Andre Beteille provides a fourfold classification - zamindar / talukdar occupying the top of the hierarchy followed by the jotedars or peasant proprietors, bargadars or adhiars or sharecroppers and khetiyar or agricultural labour⁵. Utsa Patnaik divides the classes, based on production relations, into the capitalist farmer possessing the means of production and hiring wage labour generating profit or rural bourgeoisie and the self-employed peasant possessing means of production and hiring out for wages or rural proletariat.⁶ Asok Majumdar in his work on the Tebhaga movement summarises the classification as under – zamindar, jotedar and/or rich peasant, middle peasant, poor peasant, bargadar/adhiar/sharecropper and agricultural labourer or khetmazdur.⁷ The last three categories joined the Tebhaga movement wholeheartedly.

The decline of the class of traditional zamindars can be attributed to subinfeudation. Over time the landlords subdivided large estates and leased them out to the jotedars. Jotedars had permanent, hereditary rights which they could transfer and even sub-let. Rents were fixed in perpetuity between landlords and government on one hand and between landlords and the jotedars on the others. Both of them sublet their plots out to bargadars or sharecroppers for cultivation. Generally, the jotedars did not focus on investment in agriculture and major burden to ensure continued production fell on the sharecroppers. The relationship between the jotedar

⁴ D.N Dhanagare, "Peasant Protest and Politics: The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal (India), 1946-47", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 3, no.3 (1976): 360. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066157608437988>.

⁵ Andre Beteille, *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 91.

⁶ See Utsa Patnaik, "Capitalist Development in Agriculture: A Note", *Economic and Political Weekly* 6, no.39 (December, 1971): A123-A130. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4382562>.

⁷ Asok Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal 1946-1950* (Delhi:Aakar, 2011), 20.

and the sharecropper was based on a produce rent system and this system was quite exploitative for the latter. In the 1890s, a sharecropper paid a rent that was thirty times more than the revenue his zamindar paid to the government.⁸ Over time the number of sharecroppers increased. Subsistence agriculture was being replaced by market economy. Farm produce and their connection to urban markets via transport made the landowning classes more interested in directly securing crops for the market and the trend of crop-sharing cultivation increased.⁹ Creation of tenures and sub- tenures resulted in land passing into the hands of urban high castes and non-cultivating classes like lawyers, merchant traders, brokers and urban moneylenders who can be clubbed into the category of middle class urban *bhadraloks* who became the jotedars and under- raiyats.¹⁰ Land now was a source of prestige and an investment as well and as Pradip Sinha notes, ‘ at the turn of the century, there were in fact very few bhadralok families without an interest in landed rent’.¹¹ These new tenure holders preferred bargadari crop sharing cultivation.

One prominent feature of the agrarian hierarchy needs to be highlighted in this context which had been continuing post application of the Settlement was the decline of older types of rural elite. Large number of traditional zamindari estates went into crisis. We know from previous discussions that, the jotedar class was born mainly out of creation of tenures. An example can be provided from the district of Midnapore in the table below.

Table 3.1

ZAMINDARI ESTATES AND CREATION OF TENURES IN SELECTIVE PARGANAS OF MIDNAPORE, 1872

Pargana	Number of Estates	Number of Tenures
Amarshi	83	1445
Belabaria	2	162
Bogri	106	404
Brahmanbhum	39	1821
Chiarah	3	124
Kismet Kasijora	45	1118
Jamboni	1	295
Jatiboni	1	267

⁸ P.K Mukherjee, *Land Problems in India* (London: Longmans, Green and Co.,1933), 305, 361-362.

⁹ Dhanagare, “Peasant Protest and Politics”, 360-378.

¹⁰ Mukherjee, *Land Problems in India* ,101-103.

¹¹ Pradip Sinha, *Nineteenth Century Bengal: Aspects of Social History. A Study in Some New Pressures on Society and in Relation Between Tradition and Change* (Calcutta: Firma, K.L Mukhopadhyay, 1965),58-79

Pargana	Number of Estates	Number of Tenures
Jhargram	1	340
Kasijora	216	3704
KismatMidnapore	9	458
Midnapore	138	3147
Moynachore	139	921
Madkarpore	6	172
Mahisadal	4	2027
Narayangarh	24	104
Narayangarkismat	1	167
Nayabasan	5	50
Narajole	3	272
Tamluk	24	213
Estates under Temporarily Settled Area or Government managed estates		
Majnamutha	317	90
Jalamutha	122	355 [64 paid rent]
Dorodubnan	333	185

Source: Chitta Panda, *The Decline of Bengal Zamindars: Midnapore (1870-1920)* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30-31.

Tenures resulted in dependence of zamindars on cooperation and goodwill of tenure holders. Problems faced by zamindars like succession, inheritance, its impact on estate management and financial liabilities other than revenue demand like household budget and debt resulted in creation of tenurial rights. The rights created along with the social origin of this emerging groups resulted in them effectively sharing control over lands in a village. They eventually usurped the zamindar's authority over peasants and finally came to control the zamindars themselves.¹² All such intermediate tenures were subject to sale and transfers and estates. Such was the degree of impoverishment that both proprietary and rent collecting rights of most important parganas like Bhanjabhum, Bogri, Bahadurpur and a host of others passed to Mitras, Gangopadhyayas, Mukhopadhyayas and Nandis of Calcutta and Hooghly, Bags of Keshpur and the Midnapore Zamindari Company of Andrew Yule.¹³ By virtue of his crucial position in the rent collecting hierarchy and more importantly by his place at the head of the village landholding and credit structure, the jotedar increasingly became the key actor in the social and political destiny of rural Bengal.¹⁴ As we move into the 20th century, the jotedar- bargadar

¹²Chitta Panda, *The Decline of Bengal Zamindars: Midnapore (1870-1920)* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39.

¹³ Panda, *The Decline of Bengal Zamindars*, p.42.

¹⁴ See Sunil K. Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1972), 1-15.

equation and relations of exploitation became the key feature of agrarian relations in major portions of Bengal. For instance, in North Bengal bulk of land was held in large parcels by substantial jotedars, the rest in small quantities by small jotedars. The big ones monopolised the product market and extracted large proportion of sharecropper produce in the form of share rent or loan interest. The jotedars decided on the choice of crops and where to share the produce. The dual role of landholder cum creditor made the big jotedar of North Bengal a power to be reckoned with. Similar structure prevailed in 24 Parganas and western Khulna.¹⁵

An interesting observation regarding growth of intermediate interests has been provided by Sirajul Islam. Until the end of the 17th century most zamindaris were pargana based i.e. their sizes were manageable. Under Murshid Quli Khan's reorganisation of zamindaris for simplification of revenue collection, big territorial estates had emerged. Such zamindaris were huge bureaucratic hierarchies. From the highest Raja to the lowest village rentier there were many administrative and tenorial layers fulfilling assigned roles within the structure and like the zamindari itself such roles also became hereditary. With the decay or ruin of the main zamindari family under the impact of the British rule, these officials emerged as members of a reconstituted rural elite.¹⁶ Because of the unwieldy size of the big zamindaris, the village chiefs became the bedrock of the multi-tiered management structure. In this context Sirajul Islam points out the emergence of a class of monopolist peasants which he terms as the '*shah*' (prince) raiyats. The traditional rural organisation was compromised with the anarchy that commenced with the double government (1765-1772), repeated famines, government pressures to increase revenue along with the collapse of law and order and traditional judicial system. The *shah* raiyats took advantage of this vacuum. They took possession of extensive tracts of land which were left depopulated by death and desertion and with the help of zamindari and collectorate *amlas*, they had these settled in their names. It was these *shah* raiyats who assumed egalitarian titles like jotedar, pradhan, mandal etc. Social dominance was hence put in place via land control.¹⁷

In this context, a special reference to the mandali system of Midnapore especially of the jungle tracts can be made. This arose from the relation between the tribal communities and land

¹⁵ Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 15.

¹⁶ Sirajul Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure: The Origin and Growth of Intermediate Interests in the 19th Century* (Calcutta: K.P Bagchi and Company, 1988), 3.

¹⁷ Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure*, 6-7.

reclamation. This system pre-dated the colonial rule. The Report of the Rent Law Commission 1883 described the system as follows,

In parts of Midnapore bordering on the junglemahals there is a class of persons termed mandals who came into existence in the following manner; the zamindar granted a track of waste land to a substantial raiyat, termed as *abadkar*, who undertook to bring it under cultivation, paying the zamindar a stipulated lumpsum as rent. The *abadkar*, partly by the labour of his own family and dependents, and partly by inducing other raiyats to settle under him, gradually, reclaimed the greater part of the grant and established a village upon it, to which he usually gave his name and as head of the settlement he was called mandal or headman. The zamindar and the mandal from time to time readjusted the terms of their bargain, but the zamindar never interfered between the mandal and his undertenants...[The]mandali right became transferable by custom.¹⁸

In Nayagram and Rohini (Gopiballavpur) area, the mandal was called *pradhan*. The role of mandals or clan leaders were similar to the jotedars. The social organisation of the reclaimers and cultivators of the land in these areas exhibited tribal forms. Leaders of tribal communities known as mandals negotiated conditions of settlement of an uncultivated tract with the zamindars and undertook to collect and pay the rent on behalf of the community as a whole. By early 20th century the mandal system virtually disintegrated. With the arrival of the Bengalis from the east and Utkal brahmins of Orissa from the west (*dikus/dikkus*) as traders and moneylenders, land alienation of the tribals ensued. The mahajan first dislodged the mandal, usurped the position of the tenure holder and then encroached the best lands of the individual tenants.¹⁹ Land alienation and indebtedness later on proved to be an important point of grievance and rallying point of tribal mobilisation against exploitation.²⁰

Now we can turn to the bargadari system and condition of the sharecroppers. The practice of the mandali system though appearing to be a local phenomenon, had a generalised trend as far as the question of evolution of this system is concerned. The landowning classes reclaimed lands using the service of tribals and other lower castes who were then ousted from those lands. The lands were then leased out to those with ability to pay high cash rents who in turn became the middlemen and gave out land for cultivation to the original reclaimers who turned bargadars. The latter paid about 50 % of their produce as rent and hence in some districts they

¹⁸ Cited in Panda, *The Decline of Bengal Zamindars*, 62-63; Swapan Dasgupta, "Adivasi Politics in Midnapur" in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed., Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 105.

¹⁹ Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 17-18.

²⁰ For details on the exploitation and land alienation of the tribals see M.C McAlpin, *Report on the Condition of the Sonthals in the Districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and North Balasore* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1909).

were called *adhiars* (adhi/bhag indicating fixed produce share). It was also known as *tanka* or *sanja* in other places. If the owner supplied seed, cattle or anything else used for cultivation or paid cash advance to sharecroppers, larger than half of the produce was claimed. Such sharecropping contracts were oral and valid usually for a year. They had no statutory status or security of holding. At the harvest time, they gathered the crop in stacks at the threshing floor or any other place as the owner wanted giving the owner strategic advantage.²¹ It is to be noted here that when the land and bargadar ratio was in favour of the latter, situation was comparatively less oppressive but when the bargadar population swelled in size, the relative bargaining advantage was gone.

A very interesting observation by A.K Jameson regarding produce rent in his settlement report on the Midnapore district can be of special assistance here in understanding the nature of both *sanja* (prevalent in Midnapore) and *bhag*.

Sanja is the one in which a certain fixed quantity of produce is delivered irrespective of the total quantity produced and *bhag* is the one in which a fixed proportion of the crop actually raised is delivered. The amount in the former case varies according to the supposed capacity of the land assessed but in the latter the proportion is usually $\frac{1}{2}$ and occasionally $\frac{9}{16}$ th but never more than that. A tenant on *sanja* rent is considered as an ordinary occupancy ryot/raiyat. This rent is often exorbitantly high and having to be paid in full irrespective of a good or bad harvest alike, it is inelastic and represents a much greater proportion of the tenant's resources particularly at a time when the price of foodstuffs is on the rise.²²

Bhag rent on the other hand adjusts itself to the productivity of the seasons but has its own disadvantages. Jameson notes that the *bhagchashi* is universally regarded as a tenant-at- will not only by the landlord but also by himself and public opinion in general. The *bhagchashi*, however, has all the characteristics of a tenant. He supplies his own plough, cattle and seed. Though the last is often advanced by the landlord but this advance is strictly to be repaid at harvest time. Jameson states that the very name by which he is universally known indicates that he is a *chashi* or cultivator and not a *majur* or labourer. If he were the latter, he would have been entitled to his wages whether there was any crop at all or not but in reality, if a crop fails, he gets nothing. Thus, there can be no doubt that he is a tenant paying rent for the use and

²¹ Dhanagare, "Peasant Protest and Politics", 360-378.

²² A.K Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore, 1911-1917* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1922), 54.

occupation of land and he has the holding on a lease renewable from year to year and liable to termination at the end of any year, at the mere will of the landlord. Evidence exists that the *bhagchashis* have been allowed to cultivate the same holding for years and for generations, as long as there was practical security and he was content with his theoretically insecure position. Jameson very curiously notes that a *bhagchashi* dreaded the new rights as with them came the issue of legal suits for arrears of rent which was problematic on his part. During the survey and settlement operations, it was seen that many such suits were being brought to intimidate this particular class, resulting in their land alienation. It was easy for unscrupulous landlords to allege arrears for years and it was quite impossible for the tenant to refute such claims as receipts for *bhag* rent were never given. It was out of question for the tenant to meet the demand and retain possession of his holdings. Hence it was because of this problem that the survey operations found very difficult to discover *bhagchashis*. In many cases no one came forward to claim the land. Even after personal exertion and patient coaxing by Assistant Settlement Officers some of them agreed to enter their names in the record but these same men came up during attestation and denied that they had any connection with the land at any time or said that they had relinquished it in the interval between the enrolment and registration. This, Jameson notes, is the striking example of transition from custom to contract which are the inevitable results of settlement operations. So long as no question was raised regarding the status of *bhagchashis*, the landlords were content (with few exceptions) to allow them to remain undisturbed, provided they cultivated the land in some fashion and delivered their share of the produce. The moment an attempt was made to give them a definite status on the basis of existing practice, all the forces of self-interest were aroused and in the fight that ensued all the advantages of law courts were on the sides of the landlord and the *bhagchashi* ran the risk of being crushed out of existence or reduced to the position of a mere labourer even before he could learn to claim his rights and use the support that the settlement record provided him. This tendency increased over the years. When a tenant right is sold up for arrears of rent, it is common practice for the purchaser to resettle the land with the defaulter on *bhag* rent. In this way the number of sharecroppers kept swelling in size. The moneylenders were the greatest devotees of this particular system as they preferred to have a tenant who they could oust at any moment.²³

²³ Jameson, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Midnapore*, 54-56.

The village moneylenders or *mahajans* were the major source of agricultural finance. The following data set provides an idea of the pattern of supply of rural credit in the 1950s,

Table 3.2

PATTERN OF SUPPLY OF PRIVATE CREDIT IN INDIA (1951-1952)

Credit Agency	Proportion of Borrowings from Each Agency to Total Borrowings (%)
Government	3.3
Cooperatives	3.1
Relatives	14.2
Landlords	1.5
Agriculturalist Moneylenders	22.9
Professional Moneylenders	44.8
Commercial Banks	0.9
Others	1.8

Source: Report of the Committee of Direction, *All-India Rural Credit Survey*, Vol.II, The General Report, (Bombay,1954), 62, cited in Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Relations in India 1793-1947* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1979) ,134.

The moneylenders demanded high interest rates ranging between 25% and 280% of the principal per annum. Some instances of rates can be provided- Burdwan (24% to 175%), 24 Parganas (15%-150%), Dacca (12%-192%), Mymensingh (24%-225%), Howrah (12%-175%).²⁴ The zamindars and mahajans demanded their payment at the beginning of harvesting season. As a result, the cultivators sold their produce at a lower price to ensure timely payment and buy rice and other requirements later from the market for their consumption. Such a trend resulted in debts. Small cultivators in the status of petty or under- raiyats were also reduced to the status of bargadars and land passed to the hands of moneylenders and landlords. Between 1921 and 1930 the class of moneylender-landlord swelled through land alienation and debt traps.²⁵ After 1929 due to depression, fall in agricultural prices and other allied reasons, land

²⁴ Government of Bengal, *Report of the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-1930*, Vol I, (Calcutta: Bengal Government Press,1930), 198.

²⁵ See *Report of the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee*, 74-75,89-94,194-196.

alienation increased and more owner cultivators became bargadars in their own lands. Many have characterised this as the process of 'depeasantization'.²⁶

The category of landlord-moneylender needs special mention here. This category evolved as a different kind of oppressor compared to traditional moneylenders. The professional moneylenders were interested mainly in raising interest on their loan but the agriculturalist moneylender /creditor used their control over indebted peasantry to dispossess them from their small holdings and then resettle the same people on the same plots of land with inferior rights and greater degree of bondage. The professional moneylender disappeared from the rural scene post-depression. Saugata Mukherjee cites the first reason as the growing insolvency of small and marginal cultivators. Secondly, in his opinion, these moneylenders lent money on security of land mortgages and they did not wish to acquire direct cultivation or cultivation management. When land prices and prices of produce both fell, settling loans became difficult and this class lost incentive of operation.²⁷ With this credit network going out of operation, the hapless cultivators turned to the jotedar for aid.²⁸ Paddy loans now became the order of the day and the chief mode of oppression. The jotedar advanced such loans from his surplus stock. These were repayable in kind at higher rates on interests than ordinary cash loans. When the debtor was unable to pay due loan on time, he grabbed the debtors land via court decree. This was further facilitated by the 1928 amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act which legalised sale or transfer of raiyati lands and extended such rights to the under-raiyats.

Such paddy loan trends were testified by various officers or other bodies to the various commissions. The Sadar Civil Officer testifying to Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee in 1930 noted such trend in Midnapore in the following words,

Midnapur is proverbially a paddy producing district and the people prefer paddy lending business to any other business as they find it quite safe from dacoits. The business is more paying, fetching about 25 percent interest, which is also paid in kind, paddy...Moneylending business is declining and there has been a tendency of corresponding rise in paddy lending business... When it is found by the banker that the debts have run too high to get cleared by

²⁶ See B.B Chaudhuri, "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar 1885-1947", *Indian Historical Review* 1 (July 1975):105-165.

²⁷ Saugata Mukherjee, "Agrarian Class Formation in Modern Bengal, 1931-51", *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.4 (January 25, 1986): PE 11. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4375249> .

²⁸ Legislative enactments also resulted in problems for the traditional moneylenders like the Agricultural Debtors Act, 1935 which allowed for setting up of Settlement Boards in rural areas which scaled down old debts of the indebted population but such measures did not address the new type of indebtedness coming into vogue and the resultant landlessness. The jotedar became the new credit framework.

the loanee, the banker goes to the civil court and easily manages to appropriate the lands of the loanee by civil courts decree.²⁹

The cultivator's relation with the market was another area of marginalisation. As Sugata Bose notes in his work, in rural Bengal the common scenario was not that of the peasant going to the market. Rather it was about the agents of the market coming to his doorstep. Peasant production was dispersed while the trading sector was organised. The bargaining power of the peasant was therefore less. For commercial crops like jute, a long chain of middlemen handled the movement of produce from village to manufacturers and exporters and a substantial chunk of the cultivator's due was taken away by the middlemen as commission. Apart from this there were other factors as well. If the produce was sold in a *haat*, the zamindars who owned the *haats* charged various tolls (this later became the basis of the *Haat-Tola* movement of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha). Manipulation of weights and scales were an added issue. With regards to grading the quality of crops like jute, the peasant lost out as well. The peasants lacked storage facility and had to dispose his produce immediately after harvest when prices were lowest. Also, the small and indebted peasant required cash at the time of harvest to pay high interest to moneylender and rent to landlord. Jute was an expensive crop to cultivate. Hence often the jute cultivator received an advance called *dadān* on the security of the crop from a trader moneylender. This constituted the enforced sale of the produce to the lender at a preferential rate. The interest charged on the advance was 24 to 75 percent and the rate at which the cultivator bound himself to sell was generally lower by 10 to 25 percent than the market rate prevailing at the time of making the advance. Rice also had similar marketing structure like jute. The number of middlemen were less and *dadān* system was somehow less prevalent. However generally the jotedars were the principal grain dealers and they obtained half the crop on a sharecropping basis. They made grain loans to tide the sharecropper in the lean period and recovered these in kind at the time of harvest at *derhi* or 50 percent interest.³⁰

Apart from economic exploitation of the sharecroppers, there was social exploitation on caste and tribal grounds. Sexual exploitation of the womenfolk by the jotedars was also rampant.

Partha Chatterjee summarised the various elements of agrarian structure and the relations between them as they unfolded post-Settlement in colonial India as follows,

²⁹ quoted in Mukherjee, "Agrarian Class Formation in Modern Bengal", PE 17-18

³⁰ Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 73-78.

(1) a landed proprietor class in decline, faced with an old contradiction with the mass of the peasantry and a new contradiction with a rich peasant-moneylender-trader class; (2) the rich peasant-moneylender-trader class, challenging the erstwhile dominance of the landed proprietor and seeking greater control over the land and the produce of the peasantry; (3) a growing poor peasant-sharecropper-labourer class formed out of the dissolution of small-peasant production; and (4) the colonial state, seeking to maintain the economic conditions for expanded colonial appropriation from the agrarian sector but faced with a major political challenge to its very survival and trying, therefore, to intervene both in the process of agricultural production and in the evolving class struggle within the social formation. Later we will add to this a fifth element - a new middle-class intelligentsia, formed principally out of the ranks of the declining rentier classes, but playing an independent role of leadership in the political sphere.³¹

The Land Revenue Commission (Floud Commission) was appointed in 1938 by the first popular government in Bengal under Fazlul Haque and it made various recommendations regarding rights and status associated with *barga* cultivation to be discussed later in this chapter. The Commission received memoranda from various bodies and one such Memorandum by the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha can be cited here in context,

Among other reasons encouraging the growth of sharecropping, we may notice the growth of a new type of landlord- the moneylender-cum-landlord. He has made his money by the exploitation of the cultivator and his earnings in the land...But he is not intending to cultivate the land any more than the old- fashioned zamindar did...But, on the other hand, he will probably be a pushing and go-ahead businessman not content like so many of the old landlords to sit back and let his estate go to seed while the rents come in annually. Now, to a landlord of this type the receipt of produce rent has every advantage; not only is the higher rate well worth the extra trouble of assessing and collecting his half share, but, and this is most important, this new type of landlord is already a trader in grain or jute. It will pay him, therefore, to take as rent the jute or grain grown by his tenants rather than take cash and then have to put these raw materials for his business in the open market. In other words, he is rationalising his business vertically. Consequently, we find that amongst these new landlords it is the usual practice to have their lands cultivated by bargadars (sharecropper). They generally have acquired their lands by buying them in auction caused by eviction of tenants who were their own debtors. Here again the same tenant is often registered as bargadar.³²

After the depression, the economy was hit once again by the famine in 1943. Successive crop failures from 1938-39 to 1942-43, food shortage, switching to commercial crops from food crops, reducing productivity of rice all combined to create adversities. Population growth and supplies did not match. Such conditions worsened the status of small holders and bargadars. Shortage of food grains and loss of agricultural labour due to famine led to rise in food prices

³¹ Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947 – The Land Question* (Calcutta: KP Bagchi and Company, 1984), 62.

³² Government of Bengal, *Report of the Land Revenue Commission*, Vol.VI (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1940), 46.

and agricultural wages but the small holders and bargadars did not benefit from either, though temporarily agricultural labour gained. The ranks of sharecroppers kept swelling.

The Floud Commission Report noted that most of the peasants i.e. 57 % had less than 3 acres of land.³³ Surviving on independent production in such a small piece of land was impossible. Hence, they had to sell their lands and moved down the economic ladder becoming sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. In 1930, the number of sales were recorded at 1,29,184 and number of mortgages 5,10,974. In 1942 the number of sales stood at 7,49,495 and number of mortgages 1,06,088.³⁴ The Land Revenue Commission in their enquiry on transfer of raiyati lands between 1928-1940 noted the following – out of total enquired area of 8,547,004 acres, 592335 acres were transferred of which 31.7% was turned over to barga cultivation, 38% cultivated by purchaser's family and only 5.7% by labourers.³⁵ The following table gives an idea regarding the increase in bargadari- adhiari-tanka-sanja bandha cultivation in various districts from 1940-1950,

Table 3.3
THE EXTENT OF BARGADARI CULTIVATION IN SOME DISTRICTS OF BENGAL
(1940-50)

District	Percentage of land cultivated by bargadars		Percentage increase/decrease
	1940	1950-51	
Bankura	29.2	26.6	-8.9
Birbhum	24.8	26.6	5.6
Burdwan	25.2	31.1	23.4
Dinajpur	14.5	37.2	156.5
Hooghly	30.5	31.2	2.3
Howrah	23.4	32.3	38.0
Jalpaiguri	25.9	50.9	96.5
Malda	9.6	30.1	213.5
Midnapur	17.1	25.2	47.4
Murshidabad	25.8	26.9	4.3
Nadia	24.1	22.9	-4.9
24 Parganas	22.3	26.7	19.7

Source: Government of Bengal, *Report of the Land Revenue Commission*, Vol II, 118-119; A. Mitra, *An Account of Land Management in West Bengal 1870-1950*, Census 1951, West Bengal (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1953),3.

³³ *Report of the Land Revenue Commission*, Vol 1, 1940, Alipore, p.51

³⁴ Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Relations*, 25

³⁵ *Report of the Land Revenue Commission*, Vol.2, 120.

It is to be noted that the locus of the Tebhaga struggles in 1946-47 has been those areas (as highlighted in the table) where there has been marked increase in share crop cultivation. The number of bargadars across districts in immediate post-colonial Bengal can be noted from the following table,

Table 3.4
NUMBER OF BARGADARS (SHARECROPPERS) IN WEST BENGAL DISTRICTS
ACCORDING TO THE CENSUS OF 1951 AND THE SURVEY AND SETTLEMENT
OPERATIONS (1957-58)

Districts	Census 1951		Settlement 1957-58	
	According to Landowners	According to Sharecroppers	According to Attested Records	Revised Figures
Malda	11836	31965	40117	49820
West Dinajpur	13012	43755	68471	76054
Burdwan	38658	73719	28931	-
Bankura	39747	34894	48626	-
24 Parganas	28462	112644	106052	-
Midnapur	79395	154219	201908	-
Birbhum	19528	33942	-	-
Murshidabad	27949	41077	-	-
Howrah	6591	21477	17786	-
Hooghly	18295	52235	19000	-
Nadia	10093	24645	29808	-
Jalpaiguri	12376	64259	72981	-

Source: Compiled by Mukherjee in "Agrarian Class Formation in Modern Bengal", PE 21, from figures for different districts given in Government of West Bengal, Department of Land and Land Revenue, *Bargadars and their Problems*, Part I and II (Calcutta, 1958). Except for Malda and West Dinajpur figures are incomplete.

Thus, we see that a semi feudal hierarchy was in place as far as agrarian relations were concerned. The economic and political climate necessary for the rise of the Communist Party of India was provided by the condition of this class of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers and the policy vacuum of the Indian National Congress regarding redressal of their plight. Before we discuss the Left mobilisation of the sharecroppers leading to movements all over Bengal culminating in the Tebhaga, a quick glance at the main recommendation of the Land Revenue Commission is. Necessary as it was these that galvanized the BPKS in their peasant mobilisation activities leading to Tebhaga.

The Land Revenue Commission Report (1940): A Brief Overview

Before the Land Revenue Commission, other attempts were made to address the rights of the sharecroppers. The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 was the first major attempt and it tried to control the greed, rapacity and cruelty of the zamindars and tenure holders, protect tenants by giving them rights regarding security of tenure, fairness of rent, legal process for eviction and other related issues. While defining rights and obligations of types of tenants like the settled 'raiya', occupancy raiya and under-raiya, etc, the Bengal Tenancy Act divided tenants into tenure holders, raiyas and under-raiyas and kept the position of sharecroppers rather indeterminate. It, however, provided a broad definition of 'tenant'. Basically, it stated that if someone cultivated the land of another person on consideration of paying rent either in cash or in kind or both, the former would be regarded as the tenant of the latter.³⁶

Different British Settlement Officers belonging to the Indian Civil Service, made a liberal interpretation of this definition and out of their concern for the miserable economic and social position of sharecroppers, started recording many of them as raiyas if they were employed by zamindars and tenure holders for the cultivation of their 'khas' land and as under-raiya if they were employed by raiyas. They also allowed sharecroppers to commute their produce rent to money rent thereby making them genuine tenants. In Dacca, Bakarganj, Mymensingh, Bankura, Midnapore, Jessore and other districts, a large number of sharecroppers were given tenancy rights.³⁷

A Committee headed by Sir John Kerr was constituted by the Bengal Legislative Council in 1923 to design an amendment to the Act. The Committee laid down the principle that, produce paying cultivators who supplied their own seeds and cattle and themselves chose the crop,

³⁶ Sections 20 and 21 of the Act provided that a tenant who has held for 12 years any land in a village, whether the same plot or not, should be entitled to occupancy right over all plots of land held by him for the time being in that village. The Act further provided that that if he is for any reason evicted by the landlord, he will have the power to recover his outlay on land improvements. As regards the continuous holding of land for 12 years, the presumption was to be made in favour of the tenant unless the contrary is proved by the landlord. Section 30 allowed for rent enhancement but laid specific conditions for it and also placed check on frequent enhancement of rent. The Act provided that once the rent was increased, a period of 15 years must lapse before it could be increased again. The Act also made provisions for rent reduction when productive powers of land deteriorated or fall in average prices. For details on the Act and subsequent amendments see, Government of Bengal, *The Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885: Act VIII of 1885* (Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1907); R.F Rampini, *The Bengal Tenancy Act: being Act VIII of 1885, (as amended by Act VIII of 1886) with notes and annotations, judicial rulings, the rules made under the act by the local government, the High Court, and the Registration Department, and the forms of registers prescribed by the Board of Revenue* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1889) and a plethora of other works available on the subject.

³⁷ D. Bandyopadhyay, "Tebhaga Movement in Bengal: A Retrospect", *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 41 (Oct. 13-19, 2001): 3902. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4411230>.

should be treated as tenants. The Kerr Committee's recommendation infuriated zamindars, jotedars, and tenure holders, who believed that the Committee was attempting to grant tenancy right to individuals who were not legally entitled to it. In reaction sharecroppers were forcibly removed from their estates in order to avoid any negative impact on proprietary interest of the owners, leaving large areas of farmland uncultivated. The landowners' protests became so strong and intense that the Bengal government first released a bulletin stating that it did not intend to provide bargadars any tenancy rights, and then it removed all of the advantageous sections pertaining to bargadars from the Tenancy Bill that was introduced in 1925. But in the end, the Bill was shelved.

A special committee of officials was appointed to draft the 1928 Tenancy Amendment Bill. The committee agreed that sharecroppers would not be considered tenants if they paid a set percentage of their harvest. On the other hand, anyone who paid a set amount of produce in rent, would be considered tenants. The Bill further stated that raiyats or under-raiyats would be accepted as bargadar-adhiar, who had been admitted as tenants in any instrument signed by landlords or who had been held in that capacity by the civil court. The measure made it illegal for produce rent to be converted into cash rent in order to stop bargadars from using that method to get tenancy rights. The landowners did not agree with a few of the provisions.³⁸

The Land Revenue Commission was appointed towards the end of 1938 to investigate the effects of Permanent Settlement and to report the possibility of changes in land revenue system. The report of the Commission was signed and submitted in March 1940.³⁹ The Commission was appointed after the grant of autonomy to the provincial legislatures.⁴⁰ The reason was that half of the ministers from Bengal were among the owners or co -owners of some of the important zamindaris of the province and demands were gearing up for changes in the land revenue system in the interests of the peasantry. The Fazlul Haque government had already passed amendments to the Tenancy Act like abolition of fees for transfer of raiyati holdings to landlords and had stopped enhancements of all rents for 10 years but the political climate was more inclined towards a permanent structural solution.

³⁸ Bandyopadhyay, "Tebhaga Movement in Bengal", 3903.

³⁹ For full detailed report see Government of Bengal, *Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal*, Vols. 1-VI, (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1940).

⁴⁰ The Government of India Act 1935 replaced dyarchy with provincial autonomy and elections to provincial legislatures were held in 1937. Fazlul Haque's Krishak Praja Party had committed abolition of zamindari and restoring cultivator rights in its 21 -point manifesto. The party won 36 seats and formed a coalition government with the support of Muslim League.

Frederic A. Sachse writing later on the work of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission noted that the Commission had to deal with a much greater task rather than just delve into the merits and demerits of Permanent Settlement. They had to consider not only the pros and cons for expropriating the zamindaris with or without compensation, but the possibility of eliminating all landlords and middlemen between the state and the cultivators and thus bringing all cultivators under the state as its tenants. They had been entrusted with the task to advise on the duration, cost and chances of making this system of land tenure permanent. They were also to consider the effect of subinfeudation on the economic position of the cultivators, compare the economic condition of the cultivators of Bengal with those of the cultivators in other provinces and report on how the credit of the peasants could be improved.⁴¹

The main recommendation and proposal by the Commission was to acquire for government, the interests of all landlords of all grades in all the estates of the province and this meant that all the permanently settled estates would become the property of the government and that the rents would be collected by the government officers from the cultivators. This recommendation amounted to a proposal to cancel the Permanent Settlement and contemplated the total abolition of the zamindari system.⁴² Sachse notes, that in Bengal, the landlords were not in a position to discharge those functions which supply the theoretical justification for the system. Very few landlords in Bengal have the necessary credit and capacity and were prepared to devote their energies to the improvement of agriculture. The only hope of improving the yield and the economic condition of the agricultural population was hinged on vigorous government action and the government becoming the sole landlord. This would create the chances of fulfilment of the most urgently needed reforms like the consolidation of holdings, reduction in the number of uneconomic holdings and better use of irrigation resources. Further there would be enormous reduction in civil and criminal litigation. Subinfeudation caused inconvenience to those who had to pay rent to dozens of co-sharers and its abolition would reduce the work of Collector and make the preparation of a record of rights simple. Also, the only hope of improving the status of the bargadars was to bring them to the position of direct tenants under the government and hence the acquisition of the zamindaries should go down to the lowest grade of the landlord that is the landlord of the bargadar.⁴³ The Report also

⁴¹ Frederic A. Sachse, "The Work of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 89, no. 4596 (September 19th, 1941): 670 – 671, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41359799>.

⁴² Sachse, "The Work of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission", 671.

⁴³ Sachse, "The Work of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission", 673, 675.

recommended that the bargadars should be treated like protected tenants and 'the share of the crop, legally recoverable from them, be reduced from half to one-third of the produce.'

Thus, the recommendations pointed towards end of rent receiving interests of all forms. The recommendation was strongly supported by Administrative Enquiry Committee, 1944 but its implementation was kept in abeyance by governments of Fazlul Haque, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy given the overall turbulent political climate accentuated by catastrophes like famine of 1943. It was these recommendations that became a prime ground of mobilisation by the Communist Party of India in the Tebhaga movement.

Rise of the Left forces in Indian Political Scenario: Communist Party of India (CPI)

Any analysis of a political party and its mobilisation efforts must take into account the party's characteristics and its place in the larger socio-political framework. For a comprehensive understanding, a party's organisational structure, manner of operation, programme and how it influences and is influenced by the environment at large are all crucial. The Communist Party of India began its official journey in the 1920s but it is important to consider the political climate that prevailed at the time in order to comprehend the tactics and policies the party developed for itself.

The main force at work at this time was the Indian National Congress (INC) which was an umbrella organisation incorporating a wide variety of creeds and factions. When the Congress was formed its main aim was to secure by constitutional means greater participation of Indians in their existing system of government (the moderate phase). From 1900 onwards an extremist school began taking shape and by 1907 the Congress had adopted for itself the goal for Swaraj or self-government. The Congress remained an elite organisation until the entry of Mahatma Gandhi. He was able to unite the people of the villages with the westernised elite of the cities in a movement against the British. However, Overstreet and Windmiller note various limitations of the Gandhian philosophy. In the area of social and economic philosophy, Gandhi was against modernity based on western standards. Ideas like confederation of self-sufficient villages, retention of traditional social hierarchy, opposition to technological progress, industrialisation, urbanisation, western medicine, emphasis on voluntary action by the rich to become trustees and administering excessive wealth for the benefit of the poor, dissatisfied the growing intellectual class produced by the western style education. To some in this group socialist ideology was attractive, as it offered a program of rapid economic, social and political

advancement and an organic philosophical view of life. Socialism was seen as the alternative to Gandhism. The educated youth sought outlet in two forms of political activity, one was the inclination to terrorism and another was in the field of labour and peasant agitation. Before the 1920s there was almost no trade union or peasant organisation. Though the Congress had worked among oppressed classes and tried to attract members, it had not made any systematic attempt to develop class organisations which would form subsidiaries of the main nationalist movement. Instead, Gandhi was a believer of class peace and class collaboration and opposed any appeal to class interest.⁴⁴ Thus, the arena became available to individuals who chose to advance the organisation and self-awareness of the proletariat or peasantry out of personal belief or political ambition.

Given the ambit of discussion here, detailed account of the formation of the CPI is unnecessary, but certain parts of that episode are relevant for an overall understanding of the developments that would follow. The most important person of relevance in this context is Manabendranath Roy⁴⁵ (M.N Roy) and the most relevant area of discussion in the context is, his disagreement with Lenin on the colonial question. Also understanding the dynamics of the CPI, involves understanding the relation it had with the Communist International as well as that of other actors beyond borders like the Communist Party of Great Britain. A discussion of snippets of these interconnections are necessary for grasping the strategy of the communist movement vis-a-vis the nationalist movement of the Indian National Congress and the trajectory of communism gaining roots in Indian soil.

The discussion on the colonial question in the world communist movement begins with the Third Communist International (hereafter referred to as Comintern) which lasted from 1919 to 1943. It was born out of Lenin's vision, who after the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, believed in the possibility of a world socialist transformation. The Comintern became the rallying point of all revolutionary forces that sought creation of a new world order for the future. As Sobhanlal Datta Gupta notes, in the interwar period the Comintern emerged as a

⁴⁴ Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 16-17.

⁴⁵ When the Bolshevik revolution was fruitful in Russia, interest in India's potential for revolution increased. India served as a major colony for the British, hence it was believed that undermining British influence here might have an impact on their global empire. The Bolsheviks required revolutionary agents along with a revolutionary strategy for this. They discovered such agents/active rebels among the disgruntled emigrants dispersed over the globe. Many of these Indian organisations had looked to Germany during World War I for assistance in their anti-British plans, and following Germany's defeat, they required new sources of assistance. Mutuality of interests thus existed between them and the Bolsheviks. Such groups were present in Berlin, Kabul, London, New York, Japan. It was the Indian emigrant in Mexico who became the first leader of the communist movement in India – M.N Roy.

massive structure of power, claiming to represent the collective will of the communist parties. It exerted a rigid disciplinary control over the parties through the enforcement of 21 Conditions⁴⁶ which constituted the precondition for a party to be recognised by it and it was imperative for communist parties to accept its decisions as unconditionally binding on them, thereby inseparably linking the destinies of the parties with the shifts in its policies.⁴⁷ The trajectory of functioning of the CPI, the policy stances it took and the problems it faced can be linked to this affiliation.

The Lenin -Roy debate on the strategy for revolution in the colonies dates to the Second Congress of the Comintern held from July 19-August 7, 1920. The differences in opinion between Lenin and Roy was in relation to the strategy and tactics of the communists regarding alliance with existing nationalist movement in the colonies. Both Lenin and Roy's draft thesis on the 'National and Colonial Question' were submitted to the National and Colonial Commission for its consideration. Lenin and Roy had different assessments on the Indian situation. Roy was confident about the numerical and ideological strength of the Indian proletariat and was of the view that though the Indian nationalist movement was dominated by the middle classes, the Indian masses were ready for revolution. Lenin did not share Roy's confidence in the strength of the Indian proletariat and did not believe in spontaneous development of class consciousness. Development of genuine class consciousness, according to Lenin, was dependent upon party organisation, discipline, indoctrination and at the time of Second World Congress there was no Communist Party in India. Lenin is reported to have pointed out to Roy that it would take some time before Indian workers and presents would be mobilised effectively.⁴⁸

The main point of disagreement between Lenin and Roy is embodied in paragraph 11 of Lenin's preliminary draft which reads as follows,

11. with regard to the more backward states and nations in which feudal or patriarchal and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate, it is particularly important to bear in mind:

⁴⁶ Some of the pre-conditions laid down were as follows- each party will have to carry out systematic propaganda in favour of proletarian revolution, drive out reformists and centrists from all positions in the working class movement and to replace them with the communists, combine legal and illegal methods of work, denounce pacifism, support colonial liberation movements, secure support of all sections of the labour movement, organise the party on the basis of democratic centralism, revise programmes in accordance with policies of the Comintern and to accept all decisions of the International as binding.

⁴⁷ Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India 1919-1943: Dialectics of Real and a Possible History* (Kolkata: Seribaan, 2006), 2.

⁴⁸ John Patrick Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy 1920-1939* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 14-15.

first, that all Communist parties must assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement in these countries, and that the duty of rendering the most active assistance rests primarily with the workers of the country the backward nation is colonially or financially dependent on;⁴⁹

Roy disagreed on this point of assistance to the bourgeois democratic liberation movement and was of the opinion that the Comintern should assist in the development of the communist movement in India which in turn must devote itself exclusively to the organisation of the broad popular masses for the struggle for class interests of the latter. Both the views were adopted after deliberations and Lenin modified his initial draft slightly and replaced the words 'bourgeois-democratic liberation movement' to 'revolutionary movements of liberation'. However, the change was more apparent than real, as Lenin believed that nationalist movement in countries like India can only be bourgeois democratic. Roy was of the opinion that in dependent countries two distinct movements were growing further apart each day. One was the bourgeois democratic nationalist movement with a program of political independence under the bourgeois order and the other was mass action of the poor and ignorant peasants and workers for their liberation from all sorts of exploitation. The former endeavours to control the latter and the Comintern should try to prevent this. The first necessary task therefore was to form communist parties that would organise peasants and workers and lead them to revolution. The anti-imperialist struggle according to him should not mean endorsing the nationalist aspirations of the native bourgeoisie.⁵⁰

The reason for Roy's opposition to work alongside the INC has been rightly noted by Haithcox. He notes that when Roy had left India, the Congress that he had witnessed was dominated by the moderate faction. Situation had changed after the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the 1907 Surat Split.⁵¹ On one hand the extremist wing of the Congress had taken shape and on the other side secret revolutionary organisations or to use British terminology, terrorist organisations, had propped up like the Anushilan Samiti and Jugantor. Radical nationalists became temporarily detached from the Congress and did not return before 1915. Gandhi returned to India around the same time and by 1918 the moderates were outnumbered. When the strategy

⁴⁹ V.I Lenin, "Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions for The Second Congress of The Communist International" in *Lenin's Collected Works*, Vol.31, trans. Julius Katzer, 2nd English Edition (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 144-151, accessed December 15, 2023,

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm> .

⁵⁰ Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 29; Also see John P. Haithcox, "The Roy-Lenin Debate on Colonial Policy: A New Interpretation", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 23, no. 1 (November, 1963):93-101, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2050635> .

⁵¹ Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India*, 13.

regarding colonial India was being debated in the Comintern, INC under the leadership of Gandhi was turning from an elite middle-class debating organisation to that of a mass organisation. Political scene was becoming radicalised. Workers were getting organised. The trade union movement which was born immediately after the war culminated in the creation of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in July 1920 under Lala Lajpat Rai. This was India's sole trade union federation till 1929 and till 1927 it was dominated by nationalists and moderate trade unionists, after which the scenario changed. The communists began to enter the trade unions from 1923 onwards and with time these organisations became the frontrunners of communist mobilisation in India. It must be noted here that the Indian Communist Party was formed in 1920 at Tashkent in the aftermath of the Second Congress and the Communist Party of India on the Indian soil was formed much later in Kanpur in 1925.

Throughout the 1920s, Roy made efforts to organise the communist movement in India. During the early period he had hoped to penetrate the nationalist movement not only through radical Congress members but also via members of the Khilafat movement, Bengal revolutionary societies and trade unions. After the ban on extremist groups that had proliferated post-partition of Bengal was lifted, they joined the Congress in large numbers under the initiative of Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das. It was some of the prominent members of the Jugantor group that provided the initial base and support to Roy's ambition.

The presence of communists in the political life of the country was noted from the early 1920s. Roy's plan for the communist movement in India consisted of two main elements- firstly, those Indians who had already accepted communism were to form an opposition bloc in the Congress and try to capture the leadership and secondly congressmen with liberal social views were to be converted towards communism via propaganda.⁵² Roy tried to influence Chittaranjan Roy in this regard who was the President of Congress in 1921. Through his articles in his journal *Advance Guard* (earlier *Vanguard*) he had appealed that the Congress should take up a definite programme that would align it with the exploited workers and peasants like complete national independence, universal suffrage, abolition of landlordism, nationalisation of public utilities, full rights for labour to organise, minimum wages in all industries and 8 hour work day etc.⁵³ However, his purpose to organise a revolutionary party within the Congress was defeated and his emphasis shifted towards building a communist party that would be working both within

⁵² Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 45.

⁵³ *The Advance Guard*, I (December 1, 1922):1 as cited in Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 49.

and without the Congress and eventually capture the leadership of the national revolutionary movement. By 1922, because of Roy's efforts several small communist groups were already in place in India. The leaders of these groups were Shripat Amrit Dange in Bombay, Muzaffar Ahmed in Calcutta and Malapuram Singaravelu Chettiar in Madras, Ghulam Hussain in Lahore and Shaukat Usmani in the United provinces.

These developments were taking place against the background of police repression in Chauri Chaura in February 1922, the passivity of Gandhi and the growing peasant militancy in a changing scenario of India's freedom struggle. Radicalisation of political life of the country was indeed the demand of the hour and the idea of a Labour Peasant Party of India was proposed by Dange, Chettiar, Abani Mukherjee and others. A manifesto titled *Hindusthan Labourers and Kishans for Organising a Political Party of their Own* was issued on May 1, 1923 under the name of Labour and Kishan Party of Hindusthan which was authored by Chettiar and M.P.S Velayudham, both referring to themselves as Indian communists. This document attempted to formulate a concrete economic and political programme for national independence, urged the formation of a legal left -wing mass party inside the Congress and emphasised the idea of forming workers and peasants mass organisations in defence of their class demands. It is important to note that the 1st May Day celebration in India took place in this backdrop in Madras and the red flag was unfurled was the for the first time on the Indian soil in 1923.⁵⁴

The Fourth Congress of the Comintern (November 7 to December 3, 1922) witnessed the discussion on India and the colonial question once again. The *Theses on the Eastern Question* devised a dual task for the new communist parties of the colonial and semi- colonial nations. It envisaged a struggle for the most radical possible solution aimed at the conquest of political independence along with organisation of the working and peasant masses for their class interests. They were not to become appendages of the national liberation movements and aim at exploiting all contradictions of the nationalist democratic camp. They were advised to participate in every movement that gave access to the masses, prevent reformist tendencies in worker organisations and convert them into mass fighting fronts.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism*, 93.

⁵⁵ Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India*, 33; Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism*, 88-89. Also see M.N Roy, "Speech in Discussion of the Eastern Question", November 22, 1922, in *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, ed. & trans. John

The communist movement faced wrath of the British government in its embryonic stage itself in the form of the Peshawar Conspiracy case (1922), Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy case (1924) and finally the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929). The charge levelled was conspiracy to organise a revolutionary organisation for overthrowing British rule in India. In the Kanpur case, M.N Roy, Dange, Muzaffar Ahmed, Chettiar, Usmani all were charged with conspiracy. Ahmed, Dange and Usmani were sentenced to four years imprisonment. Although the British had anticipated that this would dampen the spirit of communism, they instead served to popularise it and introduced the masses to the existence of active communism on Indian soil. As an aftermath of these trials, the CPI was formed on the Indian soil in December, 1925. The first conference with Chettiar serving as the President elect was held in Kanpur in December coinciding with the annual Congress session scheduled to be held there.

After the crackdown attempts of the government it was decided that the formation of a people's party was necessary as it would provide a legal cover and a popular platform around which likeminded nationalist individuals could rally with the workers and peasants, with the Communist Party operating in secrecy. The Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924 also endorsed such strategy. Hence in addition to the formation of CPI, 1925 also witnessed the creation of the predecessor of the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party (WPP). The Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress was organised on November 1, 1925 by persons who never had been in contact with Roy. The founders of the party were poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Qutubuddin Ahmed and Shamsuddin Hussain. Muzaffar Ahmed joined this party on January 2, 1926. In February its name was changed to the Workers and Peasant Party of Bengal. Members of secret society, Anushilan, joined the executive committee of this party. Ahmed remained the de-facto party secretary during this period. The party organ was *Langal* or as it was later called *Ganavani*. In its 1926 annual conference, the pamphlets circulated talked about radical agrarian reforms including land to the peasants.⁵⁶ However, until 1928, the Bengal WPP's effort was mainly directed towards organising industrial workers into trade unions. Their activities among the peasants were confined to the distribution of Marxist literature and propaganda pamphlets in rural areas.⁵⁷ Similar Workers and Peasant Parties were organised in other areas as well. The inaugural conference of the All

Riddell (Haymarket Books, 2017), 150-151, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/roy/1922/mnroy01.htm>.

⁵⁶ D.N Dhanagare, "The Politics of Survival: Peasant Organizations and the Left-Wing in India, 1925-46", *Sociological Bulletin* 24, no.1 (March 1975): 83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022919750103>.

⁵⁷ Dhanagare, "Peasant protest and Politics", 366.

India Workers and Peasants party was held in Calcutta from December 21 to 24, 1928 and was attended by the representatives of the workers and peasant parties of Bombay, Bengal, United Provinces and Punjab. A 16-member national executive was chosen and out of them 10 were either members of the CPI or were avowed communists. During this period trade unionism was also quite active in Bombay, among the textile workers of Solapur and Kanpur, the iron and steel workers of Jamshedpur in Bihar, the jute workers near Calcutta and the railroad workers throughout northern India. During this period the Great Indian Peninsula (GIP) Railwaymen's Union was organised (this line is now the central railway). By 1929 it had membership of 41,000.⁵⁸

The Indian government launched a campaign of repression in mid-1928 against the party and its members as it was alarmed by the rapid rise of communist influence in India, particularly within the labour movement. Starting with Dange and continuing with Muzaffar Ahmed and P.C. Joshi, all the key figures connected to the communist movement in India were detained. The Meerut Conspiracy trials which were the longest in British India's history had two distinct implications on communism in India. In the short run it dealt a blow to the communist movement and the WPP became defunct. The long-term effect was that it offered communists a strong platform for spreading their ideas and made them political martyrs in public eye, as the press coverage of the trial was extensive both in India and abroad. Judgement was rendered on January 1933, and the convicted were found guilty and given extraordinarily harsh penalties. Muzaffar Ahmed was given a sentence to transportation for life, while Dange received a 12-year sentence and many others obtained sentences of various terms.

While on one hand the crackdown on communism in India was underway, the Sixth Congress of the Comintern was convened from July 17 to September 1, 1928 which radically altered the entire instruction set for the functioning of the communist parties in colonies. The finally adopted *Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-Colonies* witnessed a far/ultra-left shift on the question of forging an anti-imperialist united front. A clear programme of class versus class strategy was promoted thereby shunning all linkages with the nationalist bloc. The nationalist bourgeoisie class was divided into two sections. One group included the national reformists like Gandhi and the Swarajists who always had the tendency to vacillate and compromise with imperialism and the nationalist leaders with socialist sentiments like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose who were dubbed as subversive

⁵⁸ S.D Punekar, *Trade Unionism in India* (Bombay: New Books Co.,1948), 326.

and hypocritical. The other group comprised the petty bourgeois and the national revolutionary groups. Even the WPPs were branded as petty bourgeoisie outfits which interfered with the workers and peasant movements. The fact that they were dominated by intellectuals and the working class has not been involved in the membership of these parties was highlighted and the communists were asked to establish and consolidate a centralised party focusing on programmes like agrarian armed revolution and general political strike.⁵⁹ The effect of the Comintern directive can be seen in the 1930 document of the CPI titled 'Draft Platform of Action'. Certain excerpts from the document can be highlighted here,

The supremacy of British imperialism is the basis of the backwardness, poverty and endless suffering of our people...

In the enslavement of the Indian people British imperialism relies upon the *native princes*, the *landlords*, the *moneylenders* and the *merchants*, utilizing the assistance of the *national bourgeoisie*...

In order to destroy the slavery of the Indian people and emancipate the working class and the peasants from the poverty which is crushing them down, it is essential to win the independence of the country and to raise the banner of agrarian revolution, which would *smash the system of landlordism* surviving from the Middle Ages and would cleanse the whole of the land from all this medieval rubbish. An *agrarian revolution* against British capitalism and landlordism must be the basis for the revolutionary emancipation of India...

The assistance granted to British imperialism by the *capitalist class and its political organisation*, the *National Congress* takes the shape at the present time of a consistent policy of compromise with British imperialism at the expense of the people, it takes the form of the disorganisation of the revolutionary struggle of the masses and the preservation of the system of imperialism, including the native states, the system of landlordism and the reinforced exploitation, jointly with the imperialism, of the mass of the people, of the working class in particular. *The greatest threat to the victory of the Indian revolution is the fact that great masses of our people still harbour illusions about the National Congress, and have not realized that it represents a class organisation of the capitalists working against the fundamental interests of the toiling masses of our country*...

The National Congress betrayed and disorganised the struggle of the toilers in 1919–21. The National Congress supported the manufacturers against the workers during the textile strike and in fact assisted in the passing of anti-labour legislation. The National Congress refused to support the fight of railwaymen against British imperialism, suggesting that they should ask Lord Irwin and MacDonald to arbitrate. The National Congress opposed the peasantry in their struggle against the moneylenders, big landlords and the native princes...⁶⁰ (*italics for emphasis*)

⁵⁹ Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism*, 135-139. Also see Sixth Congress of the Communist International, *Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-Colonies*, July 17-September 1, 1928, <https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/archive/ColNatQ6.htm>.

⁶⁰ Communist Party of India, "Draft Platform of Action, 1930", *Marxist XXXVI*, 1 (January-March 2020): 58-80, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/india/cpi/cpi-30-draft-platform.pdf>.

The document goes on to describe the Communist Party as the ‘vanguard’ who would ‘perform its historic tasks of organising the scattered masses of peasantry and town poor for struggle against British domination and landlordism’. The objectives of the Indian revolution espoused in the document included, among others, complete independence of India by the violent overthrow of British rule and confiscation and nationalisation of all British factories, banks, railways, sea and river transport and plantations. It called for,

confiscation without compensation of all the lands, forests and other property of the landlords, ruling princes, churches, the British government officials and moneylenders, and handing over for use to the toiling peasantry. *Cancellation of slave agreements* and all the *indebtedness* of the peasantry to moneylenders and banks. (*italics for emphasis*)

It also called for an 8-hour working day and the radical improvement of conditions of labour along with increase in wages and state maintenance for the unemployed.⁶¹

The highly romanticised purpose of the CPI espoused above received a setback with the launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The CPI opposed this movement and could not gain leverage from the movement’s mass character. They even lost control of AITUC in 1931. By this time M.N Roy’s relationship with the Comintern had ended and the followers of Roy’s line formed a separate group named Royists, distinct from the communists. As most of the latter were in jail during this time, the Royists made inroads into the various unions.

Another actor and its relationship with the CPI deserve mention here – the Congress Socialist Party (CSP). The Congress Socialist Party was formed in 1934 with the agenda of working within the Congress party for the attainment of political independence and ultimately economic and social reform. The All-India Congress Committee in its Bombay session in 1929 had declared the following but had not followed up on this part of their agenda.

In the opinion of this committee, the great poverty and misery of the Indian people are due not only to foreign exploitation in India but also to the economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue. In order therefore to remove this poverty and misery and to ameliorate the condition of the Indian masses, it is essential to make revolutionary changes in the present economic and social structure of society and to remove the gross inequalities.⁶²

The CSP sought to fill this programmatic gap. They were averse to Gandhian ideas of non-violence and trusteeship, which they considered to be serving as a bastion for the conservative

⁶¹ Communist Party of India, “Draft Platform of Action, 1930”, 70.

⁶² Quoted in Jayaprakash Narayan, *Why Socialism* (Benares: All India Congress Socialist Party, 1936), 24.

wing of the Congress. Gandhi never systematically dealt with the problem of the nature of Indian society and his views on the subject are spread among writings and speeches on a variety of subjects. One of his most explicit statements on the question occurred in an interview at Kanpur with a group of zamindars from the United Provinces in 1934. Gandhi observed that he was not in favour of dispossessing the propertied class. Instead, he said the objective was to reach their hearts and convert them so that they might hold their private property 'in trust' for their tenants and use it for their welfare. Cooperation and coordination of capital and labour and of the landlord and tenant was possible and he assured the zamindars that there was nothing in the Congress policy that would frighten them regarding loss of property. He however requested them to refrain from squandering their wealth in luxurious and extravagant living and use it instead to promote the wellbeing of their tenants. Development of a sense of kinship and security would dispel all fears of class war. To quote Gandhi's words, 'The Ramarajya of my dream, ensures the rights alike of the prince and the pauper.'⁶³

Narayan, writing in 1936, held that such views of Gandhi were objectively deceptive as they masked the fact that the wealth of the landlord and the capitalist was obtained by theft. Gandhi by holding such views was giving seal of approval to a system of large-scale organised theft and violence. A 'shark' cannot be a 'trustee of the minnow'. Gandhi's views had found ready acceptance among the wealthy because it made them appear virtuous and at the same time protected their ill-gotten gains. The acceptance of such a philosophy cost them nothing, except an occasion of donation to a public cause whereas it strengthens their position by giving it a moral sanction.⁶⁴

If we look at the programme and objectives of the CSP,⁶⁵ a natural alliance with the communist seemed plausible. However, there was a difference in strategy regarding attainment of these

⁶³ Two questions had been put forward before Gandhi in that interview – 1. "The Karachi Congress passed a resolution laying down the fundamental rights of the people; And since it recognised private property nationalist zamindars have supported the Congress. But a new Socialist Party in the Congress threatens the extinction of private property. How would it affect the Congress policy? Don't you think that this will precipitate class war? Will you prevent it?" and 2. "We propose to support the Congress in the next assembly elections. But we have our misgivings about the policy they will adopt in the assembly. Could you persuade the parliamentary board to dispel our fears?" The interview was published by Mahadev Desai in the *The Leader* dated August 3, 1934 and can be found in Jayaprakash Narayan, *Why Socialism*, 80-84.

⁶⁴ Narayan, *Why Socialism*, 74, 89-93.

⁶⁵ Jayaprakash Narayan enlists 15 objectives of the CSP in his work. Some of which are- transfer of all power to the producing masses, elimination of Princes and landlords and all other classes of exploiters without compensation, redistribution of land to peasants, encouragement and promotion of cooperative and collective farming by the state, recognition of the right to work and maintenance by the state, liquidation of debts owed by peasants and workers, 'to everyone according to his needs and from everyone according to his capacity' to be the basis of distribution and production of economic goods etc. Details available in Narayan, *Why Socialism*, 28-68.

objectives. While CSP was in favour of working within the Congress and believed that there was no alternative to working within the Congress party, which they felt represented the nationalist movement at the present stage of the Indian struggle. The CPI on the other hand especially after the Sixth Comintern Congress took the radical line of non-cooperation with the Congress. Jayaprakash Narayan aspired for left-wing unity and he was keenly aware that left wing hegemony over the nationalist movement required that all the radical groups learn to work in concert.⁶⁶ Hence, initially CSP was open to communist entry in its ranks but CPI's open hostility, in tandem with Comintern policy lines, made CSP close rank to the communists after 1934. Also, most of the communists were in jail. M.N Roy, on the other hand, was in favour of a joint front with the socialists and Royists joined forces with the socialists ousting temporarily the communists from control over trade unions and other frontline organisations.

The communist policy at the international level once again changed after the 1935 Seventh and the last Comintern Congress. The Congress held from July 25 to August 20, 1935 focused on the importance of struggle against the rising menace of fascism and the war by united and popular front of all anti-fascist forces. In the colonies in the absence of the phenomenon of fascism, forging a united front obviously implied building up alliances between communists and the nationalist forces in the struggle against imperialism. This meant a return to the Leninist understanding of the colonial question and a break with the position of the 6th Congress. Such contradictory lines caused serious confusion within the communist parties.⁶⁷ Under the leadership of P.C Joshi, the new General Secretary of the CPI, the Party's task at this point was complicated, given the fact that the Party was banned in 1934 (lifted only in 1942). The change in stance towards CSP was noticed at this point.

The CSP allowed communist entry once again and it was expected that CSP-CPI alliance would strengthen the position of the communists within the Congress party and the peasant organisations where the socialists were influential and in return the socialists would gain influence in the trade union fields. However, it turned out that it was a bad bargain for the socialists as the communists began replacing the former in all front organisations. By 1939, 20 members of the AICC were communists.⁶⁸ Neither the CSP nor the Congress party were able

⁶⁶ The Congress Socialist Party was a conglomerate of at least 3 distinct currents namely the Marxist represented by Jayaprakash Narayan and Acharya Narendra dev, the Social Democratic and anti-communist represented by Minoo Masani and Asoka Mehta and Gandhian represented by Rammanohar Lohia. Hence differences in attitude towards the communists was quite natural leading to inner party clashes.

⁶⁷ Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism*, 180- 181.

⁶⁸ R. Palme Dutt, *India Today 1896-1974* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1949), 397.

to determine the exact size of the communist infiltration. Since the CPI was illegal, membership lists were not available and individuals did not always reveal their communist affiliations. Claimed membership in the CPI rose from 150 in 1934 to 5000 in 1942.⁶⁹ The CSP banned the communists from membership in May 1940 but by that time the communists had become so well entrenched in the party that they were able to take with them one third to half of the party membership in Bengal and Punjab as well as the greater part of the party organisation in Travancore-Cochin, Andhra Pradesh and Madras which are important areas of communist influence even today.⁷⁰ Moreover, as a result of this CSP eventually lost control of the All India Students Federation, the All India Kisan Sabha and All India Trade Union Congress.⁷¹

Jayaprakash Narayan in 1941 cited the reason for failure of left-wing unity in the context of the CSP-Royist split in the following words:

The basic difficulty in the path of unity was the ridiculous idea held by every miserable little party that it alone was the real Marxist Party, and that every other party had therefore to be exploited, captured or destroyed.⁷²

The Second World War developments complicated the situation for the CPI. As students of history, we are aware of the fact that in the first phase of the war, Germany and USSR had signed a Non-Aggression Pact (August 23, 1939) and this lasted till June 22, 1941 when Germany violated the pact by attacking Russia. The policy directives of the Comintern were bound to be affected by such reversals increasing the confusion of CPI. After the Non - Aggression Pact, the directive issued regarding strategy was that the communist parties at this stage should oppose the war and expose the imperialist character of the war. For the CPI this position acted as a positive support to its strategy of using the war as an opportunity to further the cause of anti-British struggle in India. This stand was in opposition to the stand of Gandhi and Congress which in the initial phase sided with the British in the fight against fascism, which was considered a greater adversary and were passive to CPI's stance on intensifying struggle against the British. The entire line was reversed after June 22, 1941 when the imperialist war

⁶⁹ Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 166.

⁷⁰ Thomas A. Rusch, "Role of the Congress Socialist Party in the Indian National Congress 1941-42" (PhD diss., Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, 1955), 356.

⁷¹ It was the socialists who had taken the lead in organizing the All India Kisan Sabha which was founded at a convention of kisan workers held in conjunction with the annual conference of the CSP at Meerut in January 1936. Under the leadership of CSP and CPI, the All India Kisan Sabha championed agrarian reform proposals more drastic than those espoused by Congress. This peasant front and its provincial branches in time became the frontline organisation for spread on communist influence in rural India.

⁷² Jayaprakash Narayan, *Socialist Unity and the Congress Socialist Party* (Bombay: The Congress Socialist Party, 1941), 5-6.

changed into 'People's War' and the directive to the communist parties were totally reversed. The situation was quite confusing for the CPI. Endorsement of the Comintern line implied aiding the British war and refusal to support and reciprocate the call of the Quit India movement launched in August 1942 under the leadership of Gandhi, resulting in isolation from the mainstream freedom movement which was turning radical at that point. Hence, the CPI politburo finally accepted the slogan of the People's War, while not rejecting the basic understanding of the imperialist war with the aim of transforming it into an anti-fascist People's War, where the victory of the Soviet Union would pave the way for the liberation of the colonies. This meant the strategy of providing conditional support to war efforts by putting pressure on the British government for recognising India's independence and other democratic demands of the people like release of political prisoners.⁷³ As the war intensified this turned into unconditional support to the British war efforts which finally led to the legalisation of CPI once again in 1942. By this time the communists have already become involved in mobilising local grievances into resistances, finally culminating in the first organised peasant resistance in India – the Tebhaga movement.

The aforesaid account on the rise and dilemmas of the CPI is imperative to understand the way in which the Party was able to cement its presence in a nationalist atmosphere dominated by Gandhi and INC, while appropriating organisations linked to the latter. As Overstreet and Windmiller notes, a communist party is an elite group which is supposed to serve as a vanguard of the revolutionary working class. Its most important auxiliaries are the mass organisations which are the source of the party's main political power through which it endeavours to mobilise the working class and its allies.⁷⁴ The most important groups for the CPI have been the workers, peasants, students and women and their mass organisations like AITUC⁷⁵, AIKS⁷⁶,

⁷³ Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism*, 208.

⁷⁴ Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 366.

⁷⁵ AITUC was organised not by Marxist revolutionaries but by nationalists with close links to INC. Communists entered this organisation from 1925 onwards.

⁷⁶ The origin of AIKS can be attributed to N.G Ranga belonging to a wealthy landowning family in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. Educated in Oxford, Ranga returned to India with full admiration for Russian experiments and in 1923 started organizing a series of peasant conferences mostly in Andhra. The all-India peasant movement took shape in April 1936, when the first All India Kisan Congress was held at Lucknow with Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and N.G Ranga as General Secretary. The founding conference of the All-India Kisan Sabha set its objective as 'complete liberation of peasants from economic exploitation and achievement of economic and political power to peasants, workers and other exploited sections of people'. The conference also adopted two important resolutions. The first, demanding the abolition of landlordism existing in all its different forms and conferring land ownership on the cultivating peasants. The second resolution demanded radical change in the land tax system in the ryotwari regions and the introduction of a graduated system of tax, exempting poor peasants from payment of land tax. The All India Kisan Congress had internal tensions from the inception itself. Non-communist nationalists like Ranga and Saraswati saw the Kisan Congress as an auxiliary of the national movement

All India Students Federation⁷⁷ to name a few. Franda also has a similar opinion that CPI established its mass base by taking over trade unions and peasant organisations. The party members were seen ‘invading’ colleges to teach Marxism in class and ‘recruit communists in the coffee houses’ in the years to come. They organised innumerable front organisations in the late 1930s like – the Indian People’s Theatre Association, the Progressive Writer’s Workshop, Friends of the Soviet Union, Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti, study clubs, gymnasiums, relief committees and a host of other cultural and sports groups. By December 1941 CPI members captured the All-India Student’s Federation, by October 1942 they had complete mastery over All India Kisan Sabha and by late 1940s they had taken over the All India Trade Union Congress once again.⁷⁸ These three organisations each of which were the largest of its kind in India gave the party a mass base and using this base they were actively involved in popular connect like the famine relief works of 1943 cementing their presence in Indian politics.

The membership of CPI increased consistently from mid- 1930s. The following table clears the picture.

Table 3.5
CPI MEMBERSHIP (1934-1957)

Year	Members
1934	150
1942	5000
1943	15,563
1944	25,000
1945	30,000
1946	53,000
1947	60,000
1948	89,263

Source: Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 357.

but their organisational work among the peasants was not appreciated by some leaders of the Congress like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who felt that peasants should be organised within the Congress and preferred postponing of certain demands for economic reform until independence. Within the kisan movement four elements fought for control – the communists, the Congress socialists and two regionally oriented groups led by N. G Ranga and Swami Saraswati. The name All India Kisan Sabha was adopted in 1938. Within the communists gaining in strength people like Indulal Yagnik and Swami Saraswati left the organisation by 1945 completing the transition. See Communist Party of India (Marxist), “Communist Party @ 100 with the People, for Freedom 1920-1947”, Booklet on 100 years of formation of Communist Party in India (New Delhi, 2020), 31-32.

⁷⁷ Students started emerging as an important factor in Indian politics after World War I. The first All India Students Conference was held in August 1936 in Lucknow on the initiative of United Provinces Student Federation. The conference was inaugurated by J.L Nehru and presided over by M.A Jinnah. The All India Students Federation emerged from this conference.

⁷⁸ Marcus F. Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1971), 28-29.

With this account as the backdrop, we can now attempt an understanding of how the Communist Party of India became the chief mobiliser of peasant movements and thereby ushering in policy changes.

AIKS, Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS), CPI and the Road to Tebhaga

The Tebhaga movement is the culmination of a mobilisation process that can be traced back to the early 1920s. However, the definite organised way of peasant mobilisation against landlords took a clear shape with the formation of the BPKS, provincial wing of the AIKS, in 1936. The BPKS manifesto declared its object as ‘to secure complete freedom from economic exploitation and the achievement of full economic and political power to the peasants and workers and other exploited classes’. It also declared that the important duty of the Kisan Sabha ‘shall be organisation of peasants to fight for their immediate political and economic demands in order to prepare them for emancipation from every form of political exploitation. The increase in the number of members of the BPKS from 11,080 (1st Annual Session at Patrasayar, Bankura) to 2,03,382 (10th Annual Session at Panchkhuri, Midnapore) is notable.⁷⁹

Before the CPI through its AIKS and BPKS became prominent, other fronts were active like the Workers and Peasants Party (WPP) and The Ryot-Krishak Sabha (Tenants and Peasants Association), the latter being politically conservative in stance. The next prominent player was the Krishak Praja Party⁸⁰ which achieved popularity and electoral success in the 1930s. This party drew support from the Muslim peasantry of North and East Bengal where the landlords, mahajans and jotedars were mainly Hindus, and in the first Assembly elections of 1937 won a landslide victory under the leadership of Fazlul Haque forming the first popular coalition Ministry. The Land Revenue Commission was appointed by this Ministry in 1938, as noted earlier. The Praja Party –Muslim League coalition ministry stayed in power from April 1937 to March 1943. Bengal Debt Cancellation Act and Bengal Tenancy Amendment Act, 1938 were the two actions taken by this government to relieve the misery of the peasants but it stopped at that. No major structural reforms were initiated. The Praja Party had a zamindar-jotedar section and the Muslim League too had a zamindar- merchant lobby which frustrated any move regarding land reforms. The famine further frustrated any concerted effort, even after

⁷⁹ Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement*, 79-80.

⁸⁰ Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti was formed in 1929 and changed the name to Krishak Praja Party in 1936 and published a weekly i.e. *Krishak* in 1937. The samiti attempted to organise the peasants but their mobilisation had a communal angle to it.

the recommendations of the Commission. As evident from discussions in earlier sections we know that the Congress was indifferent to land reforms in this period. All these provided the breathing space for activities of the BPKS.

The mobilisation strategy of the BPKS was an effective and fruitful one. They took up various local issues, mobilised the aggrieved thereby creating a support base that would serve as the Left electoral constituency for decades to come. The BPKS aimed at mobilising the peasantry and launching partial struggles against exploiters like zamindars and mahajans to secure greater rights for the poor peasants. During the period 1936-1939, the BPKS organised local struggles on various demands like the agitation for *khas* land against Port Canning Company in 24 Parganas (1938), *Haat-Tola* and *adhiar* movements in North Bengal (1938-39), Tanka movement (in Mymensingh district in East Bengal),⁸¹ Canal tax movement in Burdwan of 1938 (demanding reduction of tax imposed by the government to recover part of capital expenditure of the project) to name the prominent ones.

The *Haat-Tola* and *adhiar* movements are examples that set the tone of communist peasant mobilisation in the years to come. The movement was organised against an age-old practice of the zamindars and jotedars who demanded *tola* (fixed amount of goods or merchandise/levy in cash or kind) from the sellers at the village *haats* (weekly or biweekly markets in rural Bengal). The demands were whimsical. Either it was in the form of a rent for occupying a space in the market (*chanduj*) or *tola*. There was another type of levy termed as *lekhai kharcha* (expenditure for writing receipts) where charges were levied as expenses for issuing receipts and certifying sales.⁸² The mobilisation on these grounds was comparatively easier because the grievances were long standing and peasants could be mobilised across communal lines. The movement started in October 1939 when Krishak Sabha volunteers marched to a *mela* (fair) in Birganj on the borders of Dinajpur challenging these practices. The movement spread from Dinajpur to Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, 24 Parganas and continued quite intensely till 1946.⁸³ This proved to be a success in the sense that it shattered the myth of invincibility of the zamindar-jotedar and gave confidence to the communists regarding dealing with the bigger questions in the days to come.

⁸¹ The Hajong tribals turned tenants paid tanka i.e. a fixed quantity of crops, as rent to the landlord. Since the Mughal period, local zamindars let out rent free lands in lieu of wages for trapping wild elephants. Such lands known as tanka lands were resumed by landlords later on as khas lands and a fixed quantity of produce was fixed as rent for the cultivators who tilled those lands. As the system turned exploitative over time, it became a mobilisation point for resistance before Tebhaga.

⁸² Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement*, 87-89.

⁸³ M. Abdulla Rasul, *Krishak Sabhar Itihas* (Calcutta: Nabajatak Prakashan, BS1376/ 1969-70), 86.

In the climate created by the success of the *haat-tola* movement, the adhiar movement simultaneously picked up pace in Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Mymensingh areas. Under the leadership of the BPKS, the main demands raised were – reduction of interest charged on paddy from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ of the principal, interest free loan for paddy seeds, stocking of harvested paddy in the adhiar's own *khamar* from where jotedar's share would be paid.⁸⁴ This movement was not about increasing the share of the sharecroppers but about reducing unjustified burdens mainly interest on paddy loans and illegal cesses. Interest on loans were known by terms like *derabari* (50% interest) and *dunobari* (100% interest). The movement created quite a stir, with BPKS and peasant volunteers moving from village to village propagating the movement and carrying away paddy to their own *khamars*. Such was the level of agitation that a special meeting had to be convened by the District Magistrate and a special joint committee of the adhiars and jotedars had to be constituted with included the SDO. Various decisions were reached through this committee like joint decision by both sides regarding place of paddy division (*kholan*), non-transfer of paddy to the jotedar's *kholan* if the adhiar objects, abwab for preparation of *kholan* to discontinue, no interest on seed advance and seed to be shared half and half by jotedar and adhiar and if necessary, the jotedar should advance the whole seed, to be recovered from adhiar's share later. The rate of interest on paddy loan was to be decreased from 50 percent to 15 percent and in case of outstanding paddy loan, the jotedar was not to take more than $\frac{1}{3}$ rd of the adhiar's share of paddy without adhiar's consent, till full payment of loan. The jotedar would get 50 percent share of the current year's crop (1939-40) on provision of receipt to the bargadar and he would not penalise the adhiar for joining the movement. All cases were to be withdrawn after compliance of agreement from both sides and in case of dispute on the terms of agreement, matter was to be referred to a Board established with three representatives each from two sides with the SDO as the arbitrator.⁸⁵ This movement and its result sent home a message to the peasants that united action can get at least some of their demands fulfilled. This was a psychological boost that would in turn help all future peasant mobilisations.

The famine of 1943 added to the popularity of CPI-BPKS. Relief works were carried out wholeheartedly in the villages by the cadres through People's Relief Committees, Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti and Krishak Samiti. The agricultural labourers and poor peasants were mostly affected. Poor government relief, hoarding and black-marketing by the jotedars added to the miseries. Both membership and popularity of BPKS and CPI increased in this backdrop.

⁸⁴ Rasul, *Krishak Sabhar Itihas*, 88.

⁸⁵ Rasul, *Krishak Sabhar Itihas*, 89.

Membership of the Kisan Sabha increased from 11,080 in 1937 to 50,000 in 1938-39 and 1,77,629 in 1944.⁸⁶

The BPKS attitude and policy towards the sharecroppers can be noticed from their memorandum submitted to the Land Revenue Commission in 1939 where it depicted the whole history of the agrarian situation from Permanent Settlement to the contemporary period and attributed all evils in the agrarian set up to the Settlement.⁸⁷ The Sabha was unable to organise any struggle between 1942 and 1945 due to the overall political climate prevailing in the context of differing policy approaches of CPI and Congress towards World War II, especially from 1941 onwards after German attack on Soviet Union, as noted in the earlier section. The famine made organisation of movement difficult but it created the groundwork for Tebhaga. Peasant organisations gradually spread to the grassroot level. Village *baithaks* (meetings), *krishak bahini*,⁸⁸ *jatra* and *kabi* songs for propaganda and awareness became important features of peasant mobilisation. In March 1945 at the Hatgobindapur (Burdwan) conference, the BPKS demand for Tebhaga was raised. Some of the demands formulated were as follows,

- The landowner must bear $\frac{1}{2}$ of the production cost to get $\frac{1}{2}$ share or the owner will get $\frac{1}{3}$ rd share and the sharecropper $\frac{2}{3}$ rd. Thus, Tebhaga should be introduced where the sharecropper bore the cultivation cost.
- No *nazrana* (a type of abwab) to be received at the time of land distribution to the sharecropper.
- No sharecropper to be evicted from land unless the land is kept uncultivated by the latter.
- The rate of interest on loaned paddy should be reduced from 50% to minimum.⁸⁹

While the BPKS waited for government action and legislation, Tebhaga struggles began in different parts of Bengal. As Abdullah Rasul notes, the peasant leaders found that large sections of the bargadars were eagerly awaiting a call for struggle and their mass militancy was at a high pitch and it was in this backdrop the BPKS Council in September 1946 decided to launch the movement in the ensuing harvesting season.⁹⁰ By December 1946, movement had begun in

⁸⁶ S.K Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47* (New Delhi: People's Publishing house, 1972), 20-24.

⁸⁷ For full text of the Memorandum by the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha and their oral evidence to the Commission see Government of Bengal, *Report of the Land Revenue Commission*, Vol.VI (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1940), 3-72.

⁸⁸ Peasant volunteer force, where anybody above 18 years of age dedicated to peasant organisation could join. Every family contributed 1 volunteer and ten volunteers formed a village squad.

⁸⁹ Rasul, *Krishak Sabhar Itihas*, 138.

⁹⁰ M. Abdullah Rasul, *Tebhaga Struggle of Bengal*, All India Kisan Sabha pamphlet (Delhi, March 1986), 6-7

various areas. Dinajpur (North Bengal), Kakdwip, Sonarpur, Bhangor (South 24 parganas), Jessore, Rangpur, Chittagong, Mymensingh (East Bengal), Tamruk, Nandigram, Panskura (Midnapore) were prominent flashpoints of the struggle.

The first stage of the movement was peaceful and the main action involved harvesting of the crop and stocking it in the *khamars* of the bargadars instead of the jotedars. The Muslim League ministry headed by H.S Suhrawardy prepared a Bill called the Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill and published it in the official Calcutta Gazette on January 22, 1947. The provisions of the Bill included that the bargadar would retain two-thirds of the produce, if he bore all the expenses of cultivation and aimed to provide protection against eviction. This publication alarmed the jotedars who felt that the Bill would jeopardise their interests. The support base of the Muslim League ministry was drawn on the jotedar class and hence faced with opposition they did not introduce the Bill. The movement turned violent in the second phase facing the jotedar offensive on one hand and repressive machinery of the state on the other.

The organisation of the movement deserves special mention in this context. Three types of leaders organised the movement – urban based middle-class provincial leaders of CPI and BPKS operating mainly at province and sometimes at district levels, urban leaders coordinating movement at district level, urban middle-class leadership at the village level who became a part of the life of the villagers and finally the grass root leaders emerging from the ranks of the aggrieved themselves.⁹¹ Village level committees of the Krishak Sabha, special Tebhaga committees, legal aid committees looked into different aspects of the movement. Volunteer forces (*bahinis*) played very important role in the struggles. The movement saw massive participation of women. Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS) formed in April 1942 played a very important role whose activities were especially noticeable during the famine relief work in 1943 and continued in the entire struggle period. Bimala Maji of Midnapore, Rashmoni (a Hajong tribal woman) are prominent names among many others. Tebhaga saw the rebirth of women as a rebel in rural Bengal. Armed with *Da* (Chopper), *Bantis* (fish knives) and even broomsticks, women came to the forefront of the movement where many embraced deaths in police firings as well. Such images and accounts are to recur in all future agrarian struggles in Bengal. Another force to reckon was the activities of the student community. Students of the Bengal Provincial Students' Federation (BPSF, student wing of CPI) went to villages to

⁹¹ Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement*, 129-130.

propagate movement mainly in Dinajpur and Midnapore like Ananta Maji, Ranjit Sukul etc. Propaganda and slogans⁹² played a very important role in mobilisation as they became the battle cry of sharecroppers. Regarding weakness of the movement, the provincial leadership during their review realised that greater planning, circumspection and preparation was required for a movement of this scale. Also, organisation of trained volunteers to defend fighting peasants were required and most importantly the small jotedars who could have been neutralised with some compromise was not prioritised. This, if done, would have cut into the strength of the big jotedars and their offensive.⁹³

The movement was short-lived given the nature of the period in which it was launched. Independence, partition and the subsequent developments took the front seat in history. The movement however had a galvanising effect on the consciousness of the peasantry. The face of rural Bengal changed irreversibly. The peasants understood the power of organisation and there was a huge legitimacy boost for the Communist forces. March 19, 1947 issue of *The Statesman* reported,

Dumb through past centuries, he is today transformed by the start of slogans. It is inspiring to see him marching across a field with his fellows, each man shouldering a lathi like a rifle, with a red flag at the head of procession. It is sinister to hear them greet each other in silence of the bamboo groves with clinched left fists raised to foreheads and a whispered Inquilab comrade.⁹⁴

As far as the electoral participation of CPI is concerned in this period, it must be noted that the Party contested for the first time in the pre-partition united Bengal Assembly in 1946. This was an election to choose the first provincial legislature of post-war Bengal as well as the members of all India Constituent Assembly to draft the constitution. In the 1946 elections, 12 parties contested 250 seats, 89 of which remained within West Bengal after partition and remaining 161 went over to East Pakistan. The CPI contested 3 of these seats and won. The party also succeeded in sending the only communist member to the constituent assembly-

⁹² *adhi noy Tebhaga chai* (no ½ share, we demand tebhaga); *bina Rashide bhag noy* (no share without receipt); *baje aday noy* (no illegal exaction); *jomi theke ucched noy* (no forcible eviction from land); *nij khamare dhan tolo* (take harvest to your own khamar); *jan debo tobu dhan debo na* (we would sacrifice our lives but not our paddy); *majur chasir bibhed nai/majuri , bhag, sanja ,khajna ek larai* (no difference between agricultural labour and peasant, struggles for wages, share, sanja and rent are the same); *jamidarar dala noy- major ra ek hou* (Agricultural workers unite, none be agents of the zamindars); *aat ghantar beshi khatuni na* (no work more than 8 hours a day); *ponero bighar kom khajna noy*(no rent for less than 15 bighas of land); *bina khesharote jamidari ucched koro* (abolish zamindari without compensation); *chashir haate jomi chai* (land to the tiller); *bastu bhitar odhikar chai* (ownership of homestead demanded), *khajnar bodole aaykar chai* (agricultural income tax instead of rent demanded); *lal jhandar bahire gram nai* (no village without Red flag) etc.

⁹³ Rasul, *Tebhaga Struggle of Bengal*, 13.

⁹⁴ *The Statesman*, March 19, 1947.

Somnath Lahiri. In the 1952 elections it won 23 seats out of 238 seats and became the largest opposition party in West Bengal.⁹⁵

After the partition, the Muslim League government ceased to exist in Bengal. A Congress ministry was installed in its place headed by Dr. Prafulla Ghosh who was replaced by Dr. B.C Roy a few months later. In 1949 the West Bengal government issued the Bargadar Ordinance giving some concessions regarding produce share and other demands. Conditional protection against eviction was also provided. The Ordinance was enacted in 1950. In October 1952 the Bargadar Act was amended by another Ordinance but this too failed to address the demands. The main reason was the social support base of the Congress ministry. In 1953 the Estates Acquisition Bill was introduced by the government providing for the abolition of Permanent Settlement and zamindari system. The impact and loopholes of the Zamindari Abolition Acts provided the ground for future movements.

The Congress and the Communist Party of India on the Agrarian Question in the 1940s

Amidst the charged-up climate of independence, the question on land and agrarian reforms did not take a backseat in the programme of the Indian National Congress. The Congress had been advocating land reforms for quite some time, by raising the issue of feudal intermediaries' elimination, bestowing tenurial security and economic stability on the peasantry. The Karachi Resolution of the Congress adopted in March 1931 had called for land reform among its provisions.⁹⁶ In the 1936 election manifesto, the party pleaded for reform of land tenure, revenue and rent without detailing the comprehensive nature of such reforms. In the election manifesto of 1946, the Congress specifically put forward as its objective, removal of intermediaries between the peasants and the state and the acquisition of the rights on payment of equitable compensation as the first step of land reform.⁹⁷

In December 1947, Dr. Rajendra Prasad constituted the Agrarian Reforms Committee under the chairmanship of J.C Kumarappa to make recommendations regarding agrarian reforms arising out of the abolition of zamindari. It was also to report on co-operative farming, methods of improving agricultural production, position of small holdings, sub-tenants and landless labour. The Report of the Committee is divided into eleven chapters, the first four chapters

⁹⁵ Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, 33.

⁹⁶ H.C.L Merillat, *Land and Constitution in India* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, ,1970), 39

⁹⁷ H.D Malaviya, *Land Reforms in India* (New Delhi: Economic and Political Research Department, AICC, 1954), 65,66,75.

dealing with the main problems of rights in land, the future pattern of agrarian economy and the role cooperative farming can play in the question of land management while the other chapters deals with the problem of agricultural indebtedness, rural finance and marketing, agricultural labour, stabilization of agricultural prices, agricultural improvements , agro-industries, rural welfare and agricultural statistics.

With regards to land reforms, the Committee clearly stated that lasting improvement in agricultural production and efficiency is impossible without comprehensive reforms in the country's land system. Various states had already taken up Zamindari Abolition Bills thereby implementing this objective. The Committee strongly recommended that in the agrarian economy of India there is no place for intermediaries and land must belong to the tiller, subject to conditions mentioned clearly in the report. This particular process would require a transition period and for that the Committee recommended a set of rights for the actual tillers who were themselves not owners of land. Those who had been cultivating land continuously for a period of six years should, in the opinion of the Committee, get full occupancy rights. In case of others the Committee recommended that the owner may have the option for a certain period to resume the holdings for personal cultivation subject to well-defined conditions. Only those who put in a minimum amount of physical labour and participate in actual agricultural operation would be deemed to cultivate land personally and the owner would have the option to resume the holding to the extent which is necessary to make his personally cultivated holding economic. The Committee also recommended that the tenant should have the right to purchase the holding at reasonable price to be determined by a regional land tribunal. The tenant should be assisted by a suitable financial agency regarding purchase of a holding. Special emphasis was placed on immediate prevention of all evictions and preparation of record of rights by local land tribunals. All tenants, irrespective of class, must be protected from rack renting and illegal exactions and provisions of reasonable rent for the commutation of rents in kind to cash for determination by land tribunal was recommended.⁹⁸

The Committee however did not provide a single blanket recommendation regarding the method of land utilisation and stated that the existing pattern of the agrarian economy to be too complex to implement a single uniform method. Hence certain principles were recommended which should govern the agrarian policy of the country. The first principle provided that the

⁹⁸ All India Congress Committee, *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* (New Delhi: All-India Congress Committee, 1949), 7-8.

agrarian economy should provide an opportunity for the development of the farmers personality. The second principle provided that there should be no scope for exploitation of one class by another. The third principle was about maximisation of efficiency of production and lastly the scheme of reforms should be within the realm of practicability.⁹⁹ The Report also provided for various sizes or categories of holdings like economic holdings, basic holdings and optimum holdings and also provided modes of farming like the family farm, cooperative joint farms, collective farms and state farms.¹⁰⁰

Regarding rights in land the Committee was of the opinion that these should be shared between the community and the tiller. It clearly stated that the idea of proprietorship in which the owner whimsically used or misused land was not in line with economic and social needs of the current times but it also however did not imply that the state would assume all the rights and authorities leaving no scope for initiative on the part of the cultivator. The cultivator would have permanent transferable and heritable right of cultivation subject to the following conditions like, he did not sub-let his holding, transfers holding according to well-defined priorities laid down by appropriate authority and at price which was reasonable and conformed to the test of good husbandry and scheme of crop planning proposed from time to time by the land Commission. The Committee also laid down the structure on the basis of which land management was to be attempted.¹⁰¹

Regarding agricultural indebtedness, the Committee recommended compulsory scaling down of debts on the basis of paying capacity and equity of loans in case of farmers and in case of agricultural labourers, it recommended complete wiping out of all indebtedness. Compulsory registration of moneylenders was recommended. The Committee also laid great stress on the immediate amelioration of the conditions of agricultural labourers and recommended early implementation of provisions of Minimum Wages Act through wage boards, provision of housing sites and prevention of ejectment on top priority. Regarding the problem of unemployment and under-employment, the Report prioritised the development of agro-industries.¹⁰² The Committee also talked about reasonable income to agriculturalists, price stability and a scheme of crop insurance. The idea of rural welfare was to be prioritised as an aggregate improvement of the life of the villages like provision of basic education with

⁹⁹ *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 9-10.

¹⁰¹ *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 10-11.

¹⁰² *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 12-13.

agriculture as the main craft, rural health organisation and development of village panchayats.¹⁰³

The previous account is a brief summary of the various recommendations provided by the Committee in its detailed report. It may be noted that many sections have been left open-ended and subject to interpretations. Principles have been provided that can be of practical guide to action at best like the holding sizes have not been specified and has been left to be determined in each case according to the economic considerations prevailing in a province or in a smaller unit. The suggestions provided by the Committee regarding agricultural labourers are very attractive indeed but whether they were not practicable at that point of time. For instance, the provision of housing sites for landless labours have been recommended but it has not been stated that who will provide them. Commission had also recommended creation of union of landless labour and also suggested that such landless labour should maintain contacts with organisation of urban labour but somehow the Committee may have ignored the unorganised nature of the agricultural labour. The ideas that we see were quite ambitious and for the first time such a comprehensive advocacy of land reforms from the Congress platform was indeed a sharp break from its previous ambiguous national position.

The Communist Party of India also reviewed its activities from experiences in peasant organisation culminating in the Tebhaga movement and released a detailed analysis in the form of a document titled *On the Agrarian Question in India*. In this particular document, the Party attempted to make a fresh analysis of the agrarian situation, assess new factors and frame new strategy to fight on the basis of a correct estimation of the class relations in the rural areas. The main critical approach was directed towards the Kisan Sabha which had failed to mobilise the poor peasant and the agricultural labourers by focusing its activities on the middle peasant and have sometimes have even allowed the rich peasant ideology to dominate or influence programmes.¹⁰⁴

While analysing the cumulative changes in the agricultural scenario for fifty years, the Party position highlighted the increase in the number of agricultural workers and their miserable condition in terms of wages. Those who sought a livelihood in sharecropping and tenancy were not just divorced from land but also from other means of production like bullocks, ploughs,

¹⁰³ *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 13.

¹⁰⁴ Communist Party of India, *On the Agrarian Question in India* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1949), 3-4.

seeds etc.¹⁰⁵ Land on the other end was concentrated in the hands of the rich peasants. The Communist Party in this document claimed that legislations by Congress ministries premised on the promise of landlordism abolition was fake. The proposed Bills gave compensation to the landlords which the Party was staunchly against. The burden compensation worth crores was in reality falling upon the masses.¹⁰⁶ Such bills were not adequately providing for redistribution of land to the tillers and were simply acquiring with compensation only that portion of the landlord property which had been let-out on a rent basis to the tenants with occupancy rights. These measures, according to the Party, would not abolish landlordism but would retain it in a different form. Quoting directly from the Report,

We must expose and unmask the proposed bills as measures to rehabilitate landlordism, measures that will further impoverish the mass of tillers of the soil and thereby further intensify the food crisis. They will strengthen the whole of monopoly in food, and thereby extend the black market. We must oppose compensation being given to landlords and demand that instead of giving compensation to landlords the state must provide for manure, irrigation, reclamation of fallow land and supply cattle seeds and modern implements to the peasants. *Land must be given to the tillers of the soil*, private lands belonging to landlords expropriated without compensation. The poorer sections of landlords are to be given a moderate allowance for a certain period, or allowed to retain private land sufficient for their maintenance...

The agrarian movement against feudal relations is not complete unless land is secured for the tiller. The peasantry in order to secure land must develop a coordinated movement around that slogan...¹⁰⁷ (*Italics for emphasis*)

The need of the hour, according to the Party, was to add the slogan of nationalisation of land in addition to 'abolition of landlordism' and 'land to the tiller'. Nationalisation of land is different from socialisation of agriculture or socialised large-scale agriculture. Under nationalisation, land is nationalised and so long as the material foundation for socialised agriculture is not ready private production, small scale production and commodity production is to be carried on. Only nationalisation of land would break up feudal property, handover the land to the tiller for use, end the land monopoly of the landlords and the rich peasants, prohibit purchase and sale of land, eliminate the power of money, speculation in land, guarantee security to the peasant, prevent attachment of land by the moneylender i.e., address all issues that is leading to exploitation of the actual tiller of the soil.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *On the Agrarian Question in India*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ *On the Agrarian Question in India*, 29,31.

¹⁰⁷ *On the Agrarian Question in India*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ *On the Agrarian Question in India*, 34.

Another major demand which the Party raised in its programme was the demand for a living wage for agricultural workers. This along with demands for limitation of hours of work, social insurance etc was stated as the constituting aims for a broad programme of mobilising the agricultural workers into a separate organisation.¹⁰⁹ As far as organisational aspect is concerned the document emphasised the role of the peasant committees as the organs of struggle for land and the full slogan of such struggles would be nationalisation of land and its distribution for use through peasant committees which should be composed of the poor peasants and the rural proletarians who form the majority, while the vacillating middle peasant has also to be won over with targeted action.¹¹⁰

It is to be noted here that the Party in this period was actively engaged in peasant insurrection in the princely state of Hyderabad whose agrarian economy was characterised by exploitative feudal relations and oppressive landlordism. The insurrection lasted from 1946-1951 and is considered to be an important example of communist mobilisation of agrarian grievances and radical participation by peasants. Its importance lay in pushing the question of agrarian revolution to the forefront compelling the Congress to embark on various agrarian reforms. The single biggest contribution made by the Telangana peasant revolt to the communist movement in India is that this struggle brought to the forefront of the Indian communist movement, almost all the basic theoretical and ideological questions concerning the strategy and tactics of the Indian people's democratic revolution, for correct and scientific answers and realistic, practical solutions.¹¹¹ The analysis of a series of issues such as the role of the peasantry, agricultural labour, the classification among the peasantry, the role played in the revolution by the different strata of the peasantry, the strategy to be followed and aims to be fulfilled as evident in the 1949 Report is the product of this backdrop.

Promulgation of the Constitution of India, Abolition of Private Property and the Zamindari right

We are all aware by now that the first step towards agrarian reform or land reform¹¹² in the country was abolition of the zamindari system. Before law regarding this was passed, various

¹⁰⁹ *On the Agrarian Question in India*, 35.

¹¹⁰ *On the Agrarian Question in India*, 38.

¹¹¹ P. Sundarayya, "Telangana People's Armed Struggle, 1946-1951. Part One: Historical Setting", *Social Scientist* 1, no. 7 (Feb., 1973): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3516269>.

¹¹² "Land reform" is here taken to include the abolition of intermediaries, protection of tenants against eviction, control of land rents, consolidation of land holding, prevention of fragmentation, transfer of ownership rights to tenants, imposition of ceilings on the amount of land that can be held by one person or family unit, distribution of

statutes were passed to reduce rent in the zamindari areas to the level of land revenue payable for corresponding type of land in the ryotwari areas. Examples of such statutes are Madras Estates Land (Reduction of Rent) Act, 1947 which finally culminated in Land (Reduction of Rent) Act, 1947 and subsequently of the Madras Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, 1948. The latter Act abolished zamindari estates (Permanent Settlement), converted the occupancy tenants of the zamindars into peasant proprietors under the ryotwari tenure, and these proprietors paid their land revenue direct to the Government. The zamindar's right to collect rent on behalf of government as well as his rights to collect cesses and other dues were also abolished. As regards the land under his own personal cultivation or other private lands, the zamindar became a land-holder paying rent direct to the Government like his former tenant. Similar Zamindari Abolition Acts were passed in other provinces like United Provinces, Central Provinces, Bihar, Assam, Bombay. All such Acts drew reference from the United Provinces Zamindari Abolition Committee chaired by G.B Pant.

Compensation was obligatory for such acquisitions as per the Government of India Act, 1935 which was in force during this period. This Act, as originally enacted, not only provided for payment of compensation for the compulsory acquisition of land and the like, but also contained certain special safeguards with regard to the rights of holders of zamindari and other estates. Special provisions as contained in Section 299 (3) of the Government of India Act 1935 were considered necessary by the Joint Parliamentary Committee which examined the Bill, on the ground that the rights of persons like zamindars, jagirdars etc., were a form of "vested interest " in India which required specific protection.¹¹³ After attainment of independence, protection of vested interests was politically defeating for the incumbent Congress government. The Directive Principles of State Policy as included in Part IV hence pledged action regarding fair distribution of wealth and land reform.¹¹⁴

Two articles of the newly promulgated Constitution of India are important in this regard. One was Article 19 (1) (f) which dealt with the right to acquire, hold and dispose property and the

surplus land among the landless and others and settlement of landless agricultural workers. These are broadly the combination of inter-related measures envisaged by the Second and Third Five-Year Plans

¹¹³ R. S. Gae, "Land Law in India: With Special Reference to the Constitution", *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (April, 1973): 315, <https://doi.org/10.1093/iclqaj/22.2.312>; H.M Seervai, *Constitutional Law of India: A Critical Commentary* (Bombay: N.M Tripathi Pvt. Ltd, 1967), 512.

¹¹⁴ Article 39 of the Directive Principles mention that, 'The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing . . . (b) that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the common good; (c) that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment."

other, Article 31 dealing with compulsory acquisition of property which became quite controversial for its inclusion in Part III of the Constitution comprising the fundamental rights.¹¹⁵

Provisions contained in Article 31 though providing for safeguards to various land reform measures being initiated in the provinces also placed handicaps regarding compensation clause and status of right to property being a fundamental right, resulting in challenges to implementation of the various Zamindari Abolition Acts being passed. In response the Constitution (First Amendment) Act, 1951 was passed which inserted two new Articles 31 A and 31 B which provided immunity to Acts and Regulations on land reform against challenge of violation of Articles 19 or 31. Thus abolition of zamindaris can be said to have been brought into effect by the Constitution (First Amendment) Act, 1951. Further amendments to this section were made to deal with complexities arising from interpretations and piling up of litigations. The Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Act, 1955 barred courts from dealing with questions of adequacy of compensation for compulsory acquisition of property. This was followed by The Constitution (Seventh Amendment) Act, 1964 and the Constitution (Twenty Fifth Amendment) Act, 1971. The latter apart from dealing with issue of compensation expressly laid down that nothing in Article 19 (1) (f) shall affect compulsory acquisition of property. It inserted Article 31 C providing that if any law is passed to give effect to the Directive Principles of State Policy contained in clauses (b) and (c) of Article 39 and contains a declaration to that effect, such law shall not be deemed to be void on the ground that it takes away or abridges any of the rights conferred by Articles 14, 19 or 31 and shall not be questioned in any court on the ground that it does not give effect to such policy.¹¹⁶

The period from the 1950s also saw another aspect of land reform, as envisaged during the Second Five Year Plan, related to the social objective of reducing disparities in wealth in the form of imposition of ceilings on existing agricultural holdings and the provision of security to tenants like The West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, The Uttar Pradesh Imposition of Ceiling of Land Holding Act, 1960, The Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Areas of Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act, 1961, to name a few. Another aspect need special mention here relates to voluntary surrender of surplus land and donation for community use or

¹¹⁵ This Right to Property as a fundamental right was repealed by the Constitution (44th Amendment) Act, 1978 with effect from 20.06.1979.

¹¹⁶ Gae, "Land Law in India", 325.

distribution to landless, inspired by Gandhian disciple Acharya Vinobha Bhave and his Bhoodan Movement, with states passing legislations to facilitate such transfers.

Thus, the land reform legislations were passed by all the State Governments during the fifties touching upon the abolition of Zamindari system or abolition of intermediaries, maintenance of cultivating rights, tenancy reforms, simplification of land-tenure system, consolidation of holdings and prevention of their further fragmentation, ceilings on holdings and distribution of surplus land among the tillers, uniform rule of succession to mention the core ones. In West Bengal, intermediary rights were abolished and acquisition of estates effected by the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act, 1953. Post-independence pattern of alterations in land use, distribution and reform took either the form of actions from above i.e., through legislations or actions from below when the former proved inadequate i.e., through peasant mobilisation and movements, the most prominent one being the Naxalite movement to be discussed in the following chapters.

The Revolutionary Legacy of Midnapore in the 20th Century: An Overview (1900s – 1940s)

Discussions on Midnapore always tend to focus on the district's legacy in terms of resistances across various periods. In our account on the early colonial period detailed discussion on the Chuar rebellion which can be dubbed as the first armed resistance against imposition of colonial state machinery has already been attempted. This was followed by the revolt of the Malangis in Hijli and Kanthi from 1793 to 1804. Salt was manufactured in Tamluk and Hijli long before the Company gained possession of these areas. The salt produced here was the best in quality. In the Nawabi period the salt was produced via the zamindars. The people who were engaged in salt manufacturing were called the *malangis*. The zamindars generally paid them remunerations per 100 maunds of salt produced for 6 months and for the remaining period they were given rent free *chakaran* or service lands in which they cultivated for subsistence in the monsoons. The Company interfered with this traditional arrangement and monopolised the trading in salt, affecting the livelihood of the *malangis* stirring the rebellion. It was this legacy that made salt satyagraha during Civil Disobedience Movement appealing in this area. The Naik rebellion from 1804-1816 was also caused by infringement on land privileges. Effects of indigo resistances and Sepoy Mutiny were also noticed in this district.

The next set of resistances can be seen coinciding with the nationalist movement for independence starting from the Anti-Partition movement in Bengal through to the Quit India Movement. By 1907, the political climate of Bengal was changing rapidly. The moderates within the Bengali nationalist movement were losing ground rapidly to the extremists driven by the oratory of Bipin Chandra Pal coupled with the emotive religio-nationalism propagated by Aurobindo Ghose. The Swadeshi movement did not gain much audience in Midnapore. As Swapan Dasgupta notes, the Swadeshi movement was essentially a movement to seek the repeal of the partition of Bengal and it appealed to Bengalis on an emotional level. In Midnapore, where the overwhelming majority of the population was rural with little contact with the metropolis, this form of nationalism was too abstract to convert to political reality. Hence it did not attract much audience beyond the students, some nationalist lawyers and some zamindars. It was the failure of the Swadeshi movement to find roots in the district that signalled the development of 'secret societies' committed to terrorism as the form of political action.¹¹⁷

With respect to inculcating the spirit of nationalism two people have been of significance in the district- Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Rajnarayan Bose. In the area of education especially regarding improvement of condition of women, the role of Vidyasagar is a part of common knowledge and district's heritage and pride. The role of Rajnarayan Bose is directly linked to building of political consciousness and a spirit of resistance against the British. He was a Professor of English in Sanskrit College of Calcutta from where he left his job and moved to become the Principal of Medinipur Collegiate School in 1851. Part of the Young Bengal movement and the Brahmo Samaj tradition, he was a torchbearer of nation building from the grassroot level and his activities along with those of his nephews Gyanendranath Bose and Satyendranath Bose laid the groundwork for future radical activism in the district. His notable work *A Prospectus for the Promotion of National Feeling among the Educated Natives of Bengal (1866)* is quite notable for engendering a wave of nationalism in the district.

It must be noted here that even before Anushilan Samiti was formed in 1902 (under the initiative of Pramatha Nath Mitra with Aurobindo Ghosh and C.R Das as its co-Chairperson, Surendranath Thakur as Treasurer and Sister Nivedita as Secretary), a secret society was already in place in Midnapore formed by Gyanendranath Bose in 1901 along with Hemchandra

¹¹⁷ Swapan Dasgupta, "Local Politics in Bengal: Midnapur District 1907-1934" (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1980), 69.

Kanungo- both associated with Medinipur Collegiate School (formerly Midnapur Zillah School). Influence of philosophy of Vivekananda as propagated by Sister Nivedita along with ideas of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Aurobindo Ghosh was quite pronounced in the district. In 1903, Sister Nivedita visited Midnapore town as a guest of Hemchandra and inaugurated the first physical-fitness *akhra* in the district. The *akhras* as they propped up in various parts of the district were important centres of mobilisation and training for the youth. According to Police reports, four *akhras* were started in Midnapore town alone like Sakti Samiti, Swadeshi Samiti, Santan Samiti and Basanta Malati *Akhra* which clearly had political objectives tempered by religious nationalism. In Contai, the *akhras* were given a large measure of financial support by the zamindars, especially Digambar Nanda of Mugberia who allowed 15 of them to use an isolated part of his zamindari for arms training. In 1906, the Midnapur Zamindari Society and especially Raja Narendralal Khan of Narajole helped raise funds to send Hemchandra Kanungo to Paris to learn the art of bomb-making. Bombs used in all subsequent activities including the one used by Khudiram can be attributed to the training provided by Kanungo post his Paris return.¹¹⁸ 1907 saw attempts by the revolutionary nationalists to kill Andrew Fraser (Lieutenant Governor of Bengal) by blowing up a train in Kharagpur railway station. Revolutionaries like Khudiram Bose, Jadu Gopal Mukherjee, Purna Chandra Sen can be linked to this district. With regard to the district, the Bengal Volunteers group organised by Subhash Chandra Bose in 1928 at the Calcutta session of the INC was important. Dinesh Gupta of the Benoy-Badal-Dinesh fame associated with this group was quite active in training local revolutionaries of Midnapore in the use of firearms. Revolutionaries trained by him were responsible for the assassination of successive District Magistrates Robert Douglas, James Peddie and Bernard Berge in the 1930s.

Keeping this radical and overall anti-imperialist tradition in the backdrop, Midnapore remained an important centre of nationalist upsurge dating primarily from the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements which assumed a unique local character in contrast to the national and provincial nationalist trends. The mobilisation during these periods marked the beginning of sustained mass resistance to British government and agrarian exploitation facilitating mass participation in the subsequent movements of the district.

¹¹⁸ Benoyjiban Ghose, *Agnijuger Astraguru Hemchandra* (Calcutta: Radical Impression, 1952), 34-35, 48.

Non-Cooperation Phase

The principal organisers belonged primarily to the Congress but the strategy and nature of resistances were different and over time moved away from the core Gandhian way of non-violence. The district's prominence in this period can be attributed to B.N Sasmal and the Union Board Movement. The groundwork for the rise of Sasmal can be linked to discontent regarding government proposal to divide Midnapore in 1913 and the issue of floods in Contai and dismal government relief regarding the same. Union Board was established in Midnapore with the passage of the Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1921¹¹⁹ which amounted to a 50 percent increase in existing tax for the village watch and ward system and also a government intrusion in the autonomy of village administration. Tax increase was an important factor in mobilisation given the bad agricultural output of 1920-21. The sharecroppers played an important role in this movement. The Congress under Sasmal aimed to win over the landed sections of the rural population which was affected by the increased burden of taxes but the village solidarity as it emerged saw a multi-class coalition resisting the government. As Bidyut Chakraborty notes, in terms of social background the leadership was vested in the jotedar-rich peasant section but the sustained movement in the district created the possibility of the emergence of lower peasantry as a political power.¹²⁰

The political mobilisation in Midnapore during this period was sustained by a multi-class coalition in the Congress platform cemented by the popularity of Sasmal and Mahishya caste solidarity and the radical forces cooperated with the Congress.¹²¹ Sasmal's role in cementing Mahishya identity is widely recognized by scholars and this caste solidarity across class was responsible for arresting the spread of Naxal movement in the eastern half of the district in the late 1960s. The local leadership here paid particular attention to the specificities of the context

¹¹⁹ The Bengal Village Self-Government Act (hereafter BVSG Act) stipulated that groups of villages should be mapped out into convenient village unions. Each union was to have a Union Board to be elected by people paying Rs 1 or more in Chaukidari tax. Although the Union Boards were to come under the broad supervision of Circle Officers who would be of the rank of Sub Deputy Collector, only one-third of the Union Board would be nominated by the government. The Union Boards were empowered to deal not only with the chaukidars but also to supervise village roads, water supply and sanitation. However, village autonomy was hampered as the District Magistrate and the Divisional Commissioner had a total say in the appointment and dismissals of chaukidars and daffadars. They were also given the right to supersede, the Union Boards at their discretion.

¹²⁰ Bidyut Chakraborty, "Masses in The Anti-British Struggle: The Civil Disobedience Movement in Midnapur, 1930-4", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 19, no.2 (1996):86, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856409608723263>.

¹²¹ Chakraborty, "Masses in The Anti-British Struggle", 87

and devised their own strategy and in many cases parted ways with the Bengal Provincial Congress and the All-India Congress Committee.

The Union Board movement was confined to the eastern parts of the district. In the western part this period saw resistance by the tribals regarding land rights and forest rights. Several large landowners existed in the Junglemahals in this period like the Midnapur Zamindari Company (hereafter referred to as MZC) managed by Andrew Yule whose holdings were scattered around Garbetta, Salboni and Silda pargana; the Ramgarh and Lalgahar Rajas west of the river Kasai; the Raja of Jhargram over the major portion of Jhargram thana; and the Rajas of Mayurbhanj and Murshidabad in extensive tracts in Gopiballavpur. Given the nature of the lands, they were leased out at low rates and to attract settlers (mainly Santals, Kurmis, Bhumijis and other tribes) who would reclaim such lands. Unrestricted use of the forest resources was allowed initially. The mandali system was in place which by the beginning of the 20th century was breaking down and, in many cases, the traditional tribal mandals were being replaced by Bengali mahajans and other outsiders who poured into the area to reap profits. This change was due to the introduction of railways in the area (the Bombay – Nagpur line) resulting in increased commercial value of the forests. Timber merchants, and especially the MZC, leased or purchased large tracts of the jungles. The commercial value of the timber and the desire to make huge profits compelled the timber merchants and the landlords to impose restrictions on the use of the jungles by the tribals.¹²²

Apart from forest rights there was the issue of *dahi* lands (laterite soil tracts unfit for cultivation). Such lands were not taken into consideration while determining rent. The tribals through their hard work tried to cultivate such lands using shifting cultivation and even managed to grow indigo and paddy by building bunds to retain water. The profit-oriented landlords like MZC brought such lands into assessment as well. By 1918, the economic dislocation among the tenants of the region was quite high. In addition to the already existing plight, the soaring price of rice and kerosene were hitting the tribals hard. Even while collection

¹²² For instance, in Silda, the MZC prohibited cutting of all trees except Sal. In the Ramgarh and Lalgahar estates which were under the control of the two branches of the Sahasray family, only relatives and Brahmins were permitted to take wood for fuel and other uses without permission and payment. The Santals and other tenants were compelled to pay between 4 and 6 annas per year per house for the right to collect brushwood alone. Even this right could be exercised only two days a week. The situation was worse in all the other areas of the Jungle Mahals where tenants had to make payments for everything collected from the jungles including fallen leaves and brushwood. Only fruits from the trees and the mahua flower were given free; and even here the MZC charged a cess in their holdings in Salboni and Midnapur. Jhargram estate had similar restrictions. See Dasgupta, "Local Politics in Bengal", 132.

of the chaukidari tax, the tribals were assessed at illegal and higher rates. As a result, spontaneous acts of *haat* looting by tribals, Muslims and lower caste Hindus occurred in this region. All this created the ground for nationalist mobilisation by the Congress. In 1921 when the Congress launched the Non-Cooperation Movement, there was no Congress organisation in the Jhargram subdivision. In early 1921, C. R. Das sent Satcowripati Roy to Midnapore to organise political agitation in the district who along with Sailajananda Sen, and Murari Mohan Roy mobilised the Santals in the region. They concentrated on issues that directly affected the tribals. As the MZC owned most of the jungle tracts around Silda and Binpur, the entire question of imperial subjugation was tied up to problems faced by the Santals.¹²³ The agitation began in Silda, owned by the MZC. The Santal labour working for the Company in the jungles were paid dismal sums as wages. Roy, induced them to strike. The MZC responded in a heavy-handed manner and attempted to force the Santals back to work. And in the scuffle one employee was killed. The Congress too responded militantly and directed the Santals to plunder the forests and thousands joined in that call. The MZC had to back off.¹²⁴ The success here enabled the organisers to channelize the movement towards general lines like burning of foreign clothes but was disrupted due to sudden withdrawal of the movement.

Civil Disobedience Phase

The Civil Disobedience Movement period was characterised by three types of movements – salt satyagraha, anti-chowkidari tax campaign and demands of the sharecroppers for a better deal. Breaking of salt laws gained immediate popularity in the district because of the legacy of the movement by the *malangis* (1793-1804) in the Tamluk-Hijli- Kanthi region as mentioned at the very outset of this section. Tanika Sarkar in this context talks about bitter traces in popular memory connected to colonial de-industrialization which had pushed important salt production centres like Contai and Tamluk along with its traditional livelihood generation to extinction.¹²⁵ The same locations became obvious choices for the provincial Congress to arouse popular sentiments and initiate the movement. However, due to rampant factionalism and feuds among different levels of the Congress organisation, the local district Congress spearheaded the movement. The movement assumed a radical character on account of police atrocities. The District Magistrate, J. Peddie was quite well known for his use of atrocities and torture. The

¹²³ Dasgupta, “Local Politics in Bengal”, 135-136.

¹²⁴ Dasgupta, “Local Politics in Bengal”, 140.

¹²⁵ Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 80.

reign of terror unleashed by him turned a movement of Congress volunteers to a mass movement. One incident widely cited is what unfolded at Chechua *haat*. In the area, arrest of Congress volunteers had triggered the killing of two sub-inspectors following which a large contingent of police was sent. The local reaction revealed the fragility of authority at the grassroots and the relative Congress organisational strength. The report of the Additional District Magistrate helps us paint a picture of the nature of response and radicalisation at the grass roots unlike the nature of the mainstream movement advocated by Gandhian Congress,

The sight which greeted us was most disagreeable ...and we found conch-shells and whistles blowing in all the surrounding villages and fields and men running towards us ...with lathis and taking up their position in the bundh (bank of the river) opposite us and shouting and dancing and almost frantic and wild.

...I asked these men to disperse within five minutes. They said that they would not disperse but wanted to visit the hat as they had heard that we had arrested some of the villagers and had kept them in the hat. (Later, they conveyed) that the villagers would only retire if we retired with our forces and if we allowed them to see if (the arrested Congress volunteers) were in the hat. I could at once see that from the outset it was only a dodge to take time so that the men could assemble in still larger numbers until complete darkness enveloped them and then to attack us from all sides.

...darkness enveloped us and we could hardly see the men except figures moving about in the fields and along the bundh. Whistles and conch-shells began to be blown and men were being rallied ...there was every reason to think that they were going to rally soon for a night attack. The blowing of conch-shells and whistles could be heard from all the surrounding villages and also loud shouts ...we decided unanimously that we must move at once to a better position till reinforcement could be received.

...we saw a crowd of what looked like 300 to 400 men coming to attack us from the field shouting and running toward us. We left the bundh over which we were proceeding and got into an open space and formed a barricade without luggage etc. At this juncture the chowkidars and daffadars who were accompanying us and carrying some of our luggages for want of conveyance threw down the luggages and fled away.¹²⁶

The police had to retire and leave the area. The Midnapur Sadar Sub-Divisional Officer reported on how all villages 'had been converted into forts... cutting up village paths, filling them with house earth, thorns and rough conch shells...also barricades of huge bamboo trees and houses barricaded with thorns, removal of bamboo bridges and trenches dug into the middle of the fields.'¹²⁷ Even when the police managed to enter the villages, they found in most

¹²⁶ Md. Karim, Additional District Magistrate to J. Peddie, District Magistrate, Home-Political, 430/1930, 7 June 1930, West Bengal State Archives.

¹²⁷ Sub-Divisional Officer, Sadar to District Magistrate, Midnapur, Home- Political, 434/1930, 18 August, 1930, West Bengal State Archives.

cases empty villages where majority of the people had absconded leaving their houses locked.¹²⁸

The Additional District Magistrate admitted the intensity of the movement when he wrote

The whole area of about 10 miles about Chechua hat is absolutely out of control, and is full [of the Congress volunteers]. These volunteers are in constant touch with Calcutta and *there is indication that Purna Das of Jugantor Party has been guiding them, as also the other various organisations in Calcutta.*¹²⁹ (*italics for emphasis*)

The role of the revolutionary terrorists especially Jugantor thus deserves special mention for bringing in the element of armed resistance in mass mobilisation. From our previous accounts we already know that they were returning within the fold of the Congress post 1915 and later on formed the base of the CPI. The extent of radicalisation in the district was such that villagers went and attacked the police with whatever weapon they could lay their hands on, once conch shell sounds were heard. 1927 had already witnessed strike by the railway workers in Kharagpur that became a source of inspiration for industrial workers all throughout Bengal. During the Civil Disobedience movement increased oppression by the government activated radicalism to the extent that consecutively in 1931 1932 and 1933, three District Magistrates were assassinated (1931- Peddie, 1932- Douglas, 1933- Berge). For instance, on 16th September 1931 indiscriminate firing by police in Hijli jail created massive political stir with Subhash Chandra Bose, Jyotindra Mohan Sengupta, Rabindranath Tagore all joined in condemning the action and was this act that led to the assassination of collector Douglas by the Bengal Volunteers group.

In the Anti-Chowkidari tax campaign activities were directed against the administrative apparatus of tax collection managed by chowkidars and dafadars. The Congress volunteers mobilised mass resignations of the chowkidars which put the entire rural police structure out of place. Local authorities attributed the mass resignations to Congress coercion. As the proposed tax aimed at strengthening administration at the grassroots at the cost of the villagers, opposition against the government was easy to mobilise. The government failed entirely to collect the taxes and also failed to take possession of properties to realise taxes. The collection of tax was temporarily suspended as part of the Gandhi -Irwin truce.

¹²⁸ J. Peddie, District Magistrate to W.S Hopkyns, Chief Secretary, Bengal, Home- Political, 434/1930, 9 June 1930, West Bengal State Archives.

¹²⁹ Karim to Peddie, 7 June, 1930.

Another feature of the movements in this period which intensified during the 1942 movement was setting up of parallel arbitration courts by the Congress which dealt mainly with civil matters and occasional criminal matters as well. Such parallel courts were a symbolic projection of an alternative government posing a legitimacy crisis for the state.

Regarding the rights of the sharecroppers, peasant assertiveness can be traced back to March 1922 when the sharecroppers in an open meeting demanded an end to illegal exactions. In 1928, the legislators of Midnapore who voted in favour of the privileges of the landlords against attempts to strengthen the rights of the tenants during the passing of the 1928 Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1928 were sharply criticised in their constituencies.¹³⁰ The second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement saw resistance by the sharecroppers. As Bidyut Chakrabarty notes, the clashes between the sharecroppers and jotedars led to the intervention of local Congress leaders to save the multi-class political platform of Congress. The compromise formula that was worked out was more pro-sharecropper than pro-jotedar like anti-eviction clause, parity in sharing of costs and final produce etc and this revealed the organisational gap between the provincial and local leadership. The provincial Congress, with respect to its stance on the 1928 Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act, was reluctant to protect tenants against landlords. In contrast, the Midnapur Congress brought about a compromise which undoubtedly ensured the rights of the tenants. This seemed to be the result of the emergent extremist section inside the Congress. According to an official report, 'by the beginning of 1933, Congress organisation in Midnapur was very much under the influence of a new radical group which openly denied its connection with the doings of Gandhi'. This was the beginning of a new wave which crystallised by 1939, when an indigenous kisan group 'rose against the local Congress committees because they incorporated the landlords'. The consequence was that 'the kisan organisation is slowly but surely cutting itself adrift from the Congress.'¹³¹

Before moving on to the Quit India Movement phase, the special nature of the Midnapur District Congress (MDC) needs highlighting. Throughout the 1920s the Bengal Congress was torn amidst factional struggles. Given its geographical isolation and alienation from issues and anarchy that plagued the provincial level in Calcutta, the MDC with its dedication and discipline remained rooted firmly in the district. This happened especially after the humiliation

¹³⁰ Partha Chatterjee, "Some Considerations on the making of the 1928 Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act", Occasional Paper, *Centre for Studies in Social Sciences*, Calcutta (1980): 40-41.

¹³¹ Chakrabarty, "Masses in Anti-British Struggle", 101-102.

of Sasmal in Calcutta over Corporation elections and Krishnanagar session of the Congress after which Sasmal had resigned from the BPCC. Factional feuds were absent and the existence of thriving village and *thana* Congress committees built up by Sasmal and his successors in the District Board added to the integrity of the MDC. Also, dedicated individual Congressmen like Sushil Dhara and Hansadwaj Maity kept the ground connect in the organisation alive through organisation work. Lastly, unlike other districts, the organisation and mobilisation of women by the MDC was quite systematic and deep rooted.¹³²

Quit India Movement & the *Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar*

1942 was another landmark year for nationalist movement which witnessed radicalism at its peak in the district. Following the adoption of 8th August 'Do or Die' resolution, the movement that commenced was different in nature from the previous two movements as Gandhi called upon the people to resort to armed resistance against the British. However, the British launched a massive counter offensive which was facilitated by the presence of a huge army on account of the war and the movement fizzled out fast at the all-India level. However, in certain locations the movement continued in full vigour like Satara in Maharashtra, Talcher in Orissa and Midnapore in Bengal. In this movement immediate arrest of the top leadership placed the trajectory totally in the hands of local leadership and this phase saw the entry of several new actors. Violence, militancy, insurrection became the mode of operation at local levels which was different from the Gandhian line. Grassroot politics and autonomy of unorganised politics characterized the local struggles.¹³³

The year 1941 was one of scarcity and soaring prices in Bengal. The grain-lending landlords and rich peasants of the region were engaged in hoarding stocks. From April 1942, the government began to implement the denial policy in the coastal areas of Midnapore. This involved removal of surplus stocks of paddy to the north –west of the province and all means of transport including boats and bicycles to a distance of at least 50 miles from the coast.¹³⁴ Re-evaluation of cess and pressure on local population to purchase war bonds aggravated the situation. Throughout the year, the Congress urged a ban on food exports from the district

¹³² Dasgupta, "Local Politics in Bengal", 205-207

¹³³ Bidyut Chakrabarty, "Political Mobilization in the Localities: The 1942 Quit India Movement in Midnapur", *Modern Asian Studies*, 26, no. 4 (October, 1992):796,
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00010076>

¹³⁴ Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 244.

which the government did not pay heed to. The Congress thus launched a propaganda urging villagers to resist exports.¹³⁵ By the time the national call for Quit India Movement was first heard on August 8, 1942, Midnapore was already a tinder box. The Congress organisation was strong in the district and the nature of Congress leadership here was quite radical. Unity of action was quite remarkable.

Most of the Congress leaders *belong to the Forward Bloc*. A few owe allegiance to the orthodox Congress... the cultivators who form the backbone of the Congress movement mostly belong to one single community, namely, the Mahishya community. It is a well-knit community... Any order which goes out to the villages from the town leaders is obeyed without question. If, for example, the order be given that no food stuff is to be exported from a village, everybody follows that rule, some through conviction and others through fear of social boycott.¹³⁶ (*italics for emphasis*)

During August and early part of September, training camps for volunteers were set up in remote villages. The Congress influence over union boards ensured that district administration could collect little information and whenever any police party approached these camps and centres, the volunteers were alerted long before. In the initial phase Congress picketers prevented supplies from village markets to reach the towns. By the end of September, the Congress volunteers were ready for assaults on major centres of government. Doctors and nurses had been mobilised to take care of injured in case the police opened fire. With an elaborate system of spying and signals of coordination the organisation functioned efficiently. In most cases government forces reached trouble spots after the rebels have fled.¹³⁷

Another feature of the movement was direct action and attacks on police headquarters, often simultaneously. On September 29, 1942 Sutahata thana in Tamluk, Potashpur and Khejuri in Contai fell to the rebels while attacks on Tamluk and Mahisadal thanas in Tamluk and Bhagwanpur in Contai were repulsed with heavy casualties. September 30, 1942 saw attacks on Nandigram thana in Tamluk. The crowds ransacked and destroyed several sub registry offices, post offices, union board offices and as well as 13 *cutcheries* of the Mahisadal Raj estate.¹³⁸ The atrocities committed by the police was immense, which ranged from arson of villages to rape of women. Participation of women in this phase was remarkable, a trend which

¹³⁵ Satish Chandra Samanta, Shyamadas Bhattacharya, Prahlad Kumar Pramanick, Ananda Mohan Das, *August Revolution and Two years National Government in Midnapore, Part I, Tamluk* (Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1946), 6-10.

¹³⁶ Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 245.

¹³⁷ Samanta et.al, *August Revolution*, 16-20.

¹³⁸ Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 247.

will continue in the Tebhaga movement as well. Activities of the women ranged from nursing of the injured and providing protection to women against atrocities through the *Bhagiai/Bhagini Sena* to attacks on police stations. For instance, the September 29, 1942 raid on four out of six police stations in Tamluk subdivision, etched the name of Matangini Hazra as a woman martyr of Indian freedom struggle in the pages of history and into the proud legacy of the district.

The massive cyclone of October 16, 1942 along with tidal waves devastated the coastal areas enabling government to increase repression, as they conditioned supply of aid to affected areas upon surrendering of arms and submitting of declarations by the leaders that they won't take further part in the movement. This backfired for the administration as the people turned to Congress for help and parallel national governments were formed at the subdivisional level. Swaraj panchayats were effectively administering village affairs during October and November, for instance in Kanthi (July 20, 1943- December 2, 1943) and a parallel government was in place at Khejuri from October 1942 to December 1942. The main parallel government that matched in every detail the structure of the official administration was the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar (Tamralipta National Government) which was constituted on December 17, 1942 and lasted till August 8, 1944. At this point the main propaganda plank of the rebels was the idea of British losing against Japan and rise of Subhash Chandra Bose as a hero.¹³⁹

The administrative structure of Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar was two tiered. At the sub-divisional level there was supreme leader or *Sarvadhiknayak* and under him ministers in charge of various departments and divisions. Below the sub-divisional level, the second tier was constituted by the police circles which was led by a leader or *Adhinayak* and below him there were ministers in charge of various departments and divisions. The main trio of this national government was Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee, Satish Chandra Samanta and Sushil Dhara.¹⁴⁰

The various departments of the National Government at the sub-divisional were as follows,

¹³⁹ Samanta et al, *August Revolution*, 33-40.

¹⁴⁰ Kamal Kumar Kundu, *Biplab Tirtha Medinipur: Fire Dakha Andolan* (Kolkata: Srijon Publishers, 2021), 226-228.

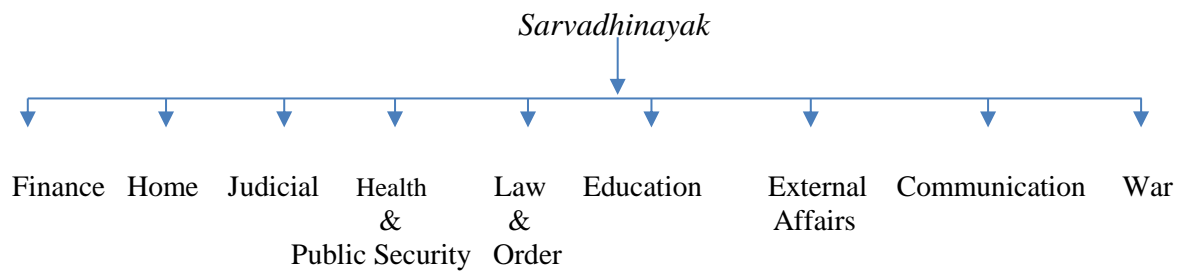
Fig. 5Sub-Divisional level of the *Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar*

Fig. 5: Adopted from Kamal Kumar Kundu, *Biplab Tirtha Medinipur: Fire Dakha Andolan* (Kolkata: Srijon Publishers, 2021),

Apart from the Sarvadhikaryak, other office bearers were Commander -in Chief and Command Officer of the armed forces of the national government. The armed forces were divided into male and female contingents namely *Vidyut Bahini* and *Bhagini Sena* respectively. For the latter, an *Adhinayika* was in charge.¹⁴¹ The second tier of the National Government at the police circle level existed at Tamluk, Mahisadal, Satahata and Nandigram with their own Chief Leader (*Adhinayak*) and armed volunteer forces (*Garam Dal*).¹⁴²

The economic administration of the government deserves special mention here. The villagers were instructed to prevent export of paddy and restrictions were imposed on landlords and grain dealers regarding export, sale and distribution of grains. For instance, influential landholders of Contai subdivision were served with notices bearing seals of different Congress offices demanding specified amount of paddy for relief work and for running Congress camps. In December, cyclostyled Bengali handbills from Nandigram centre of national government directed merchants not to export paddy and rice from their centres of trade or sell any at local *haats* and bazaars. In Khejuri thana in Contai, local Congress workers forced stockists to sell paddy to distressed people at cheap rates fixed by the Party usually on credit without interest. After the harvest of January 1943, a directive was issued to the landowners in a leaflet entitled *Bhag Dhan Sammandhe Congresser Nirdesh* (Congress directive in respect of sharing paddy) to take half the product and remit all arrears due from the *bhagchasis*. Tenants refused to hand

¹⁴¹ The first Sarvadhikaryak was Satish Chandra Samanta from 17th December 1942 to 26th May 1943. The second, third and last were Ajay Kumar Mukherjee (27th May 1943 to 19 September 1943), Satish Chandra Sahu (20th September 1943 to 12th March 1944) and Baradakanta Kuiti (13th March 1944 to 8th August 1944) respectively. For the armed forces, the Commander in Chief was Sushil Kumar Dhara, Command Officer was Gopi Nandan Goswami and the Adhinayika or female commander was Subodh Bala Kuiti.

¹⁴² Kundu, *Biplab Tirtha Medinipur*, 227-232.

over paddy to the employees of landlords unless they could produce Congress permission ticket. Ferry boatmen were under Congress orders not to carry anyone with more than 10 seers¹⁴³ of paddy. In some cases, the Congress actively encouraged paddy looting in which poor and middle-class people took part.¹⁴⁴

The activities of the judicial division were quite interesting as well. The judicial system was also too tiered one at the police station level and the other at the sub-divisional level. Both *diwani* and *faujdari* cases were dealt with. In case someone was dissatisfied with the verdict of the police level *adalat* he or she could appeal against it and special tribunal of three judges would deal with such appeals. Such court did not have a fixed building. Based on the convenience of the litigants such courts were held amidst gathering of common people in open spaces. Jails were also in place to keep the convicts.¹⁴⁵

It was in itself an achievement to create such a tiered government and manage it in a situation where government repression was at its fullest. Local Magazines played a very important role like *Nayamedini*, *Medini Bandhav*, *Tamalika*, in generating nationalist feeling in the district. Documentary evidence of the Midnapore rebels during the Quit India Movement is available in a weekly publication named *Biplabi* which appeared in Tamluk subdivision between September 1942 and August 1944. The unrelenting harassment of the military however waned the movement away. With the onset of the devastating famine of 1943, the movement phased out but some of the main leaders were not apprehended until their surrender in August 1944. The vacuum that was created after the fall of the national governments and the arrest of the leaders along with famine conditions provided the opportunity for the Communist forces to gain ground in the district paving the way for the Tebhaga movement.

Communism in Midnapore and the Tebhaga Movement

Regarding spread of communism in the district, the chief person responsible at the provincial level for building the Communist Party base was Biswanath Mukherjee. He was born in Tamluk and was a student of Hamilton High School where he was an active participant in the Civil Disobedience Movement and had been imprisoned for picketing activities. Though initially in doubt, he fully embraced communism in 1934. In this context references to

¹⁴³ 1 seer is approximately equal to 1.25 kg. For rice 933.1 Grams (approx.).

¹⁴⁴ Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 249-250.

¹⁴⁵ Kundu, *Biplab Tirtha Medinipur*, 233- 234.

consolidations that built up in the jails like Hijli and Andaman deserve special mention. Majority of the revolutionary terrorists along with members and sympathisers of the outlawed Communist Party were in jails which became the centres of spreading communist ideology. The main centre of such communist indoctrination was the Andaman Jail Communist Consolidation in which many members of groups active in Midnapore like the Bengal Volunteers were present like Bimal Dasgupta (the main accused in the J.Peddie assassination case and one of the founding organisers of Andaman jail Communist Consolidation). These prisoners after being freed around late 1930s, played an important role in the spread of communism in the district. Bhupal Panda, one of the main leaders in the district, also belonged to this group.

Mukherjee was instrumental in bringing many Congress members from Tamluk in to the CPI. He came in touch with people like Deben Das and Saroj Roy of Kharagpur, Mohini Mondal of Ghatal, Bhupal Panda of Nandigram. Communist study circles were set up to spread awareness and students were mobilised using such circles along with circulation of pamphlets and *patrikas* like *Chhatro Abhijan*. In 1938 Saroj Roy became secretary of the Midnapore party cell and he was given charge of Kharagpur rail workers settlement. Deben Das was given responsibility of Midnapore Sadar while Mohini Mondal for Ghatal and Bhupal Panda for Tamluk.¹⁴⁶ The main motive was building up peasant organisation and worker solidarity. It was realised that the district was dominated by agriculture, just leaving out the Kharagpur railway area, and hence all revolutions in this area have to be agriculture centric. On 1st March 1939 in Kuldiha village near Kharagpur the peasants, under the leadership of Deben Das, raised demands regarding revenue payment, illegal occupation of land and their return, which was successful. This had its impact all throughout the district. Slogans were raised in the district like ‘land to the tiller’ or ‘*langal jar, jomi tar*’ and release of political prisoners.¹⁴⁷ Energetic youths like Anil Bhanja, Anil Kundu, Ananta Maji, Anil De, Hiranmoy Pati and many others were influenced by the new line being propagated, joined the communist movement and became important leaders of the Tebhaga movement.

After the call for Tebhaga was issued at the provincial level, the district leadership decided that the movement will be launched in the sharecropper dominant areas where both the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers were to be mobilised. Along with that importance was

¹⁴⁶ Kundu, *Biplab Tirtha Medinipur*, 285.

¹⁴⁷ Kundu, *Biplab Tirtha Medinipur* 285.

placed on mobilising the small and middle peasants by raising demands relevant to them like relaxation of arrear revenue payment, proper irrigation facilities etc.¹⁴⁸ The responsibility for leading the movement fell upon leaders like Bhupal Panda, Ananta Maji, Saroj Roy, Rakhal Bag, Bankim Giri and Patit Jana. It was decided that the sharecropper predominant Tamluk subdivision especially Nandigram police circle would be the focus of the movement. Thus, the Tebhaga movement in the winter of 1946-47 in Midnapore was limited to six points in the Nandigram and Panskura thanas of Tamluk. The strategy was to target the jotedar-mahajans of the area (for instance – Jana family of Kendemari, Porua and Maity family of Mohammadpur, Khan family of Garh Chakraberia, Das family of Kalicharanpur, Sing family of Gopalchak, Maity family of Mahisadal, Tripathis of Sutahata, Chakraborty Chaudhuris of Panskura, Das family of Moyna and Chaudhuris of Keshpur to name a few) and for this *Anchalik Sangram Committees* were formed in the villages of the targeted jotedar-mahajans and these committees along with the volunteer forces led the resistances.¹⁴⁹

The nature of exploitation in these areas was excruciating as the sharecroppers were burdened by the jotedars with multiple obligations at the time of division of the produce after harvesting which can be described as different forms of *abwabs* like *aani*, *shuni*, *machatut*, *rayerh*, *khola chilani*, *kamar ghera*, *khamar chauki*, *piyada*, *gongathakur*, *jharai motayen*, *koyali*, *dhan bouni tukur*, *godabharoti*, *nasha bnadh*, *bijtola*, *thakurbarir dashi*, *pujak*, *panchananda* etc. Some of the *abwabs* can be described here for clarity. The practice of *aani* is related to the division of hay and paddy. After the 50-50 division of harvest was done, the sharecropper was often forced to exchange his share of paddy with the jotedars share of hay. After a year's harvesting was complete, the sharecropper had to apply to the jotedar for being allowed to cultivate the land in the next season and for the application, he had to pay fees (*shuni*) to the officials of the jotedars like the naibs and gomasthas. *Bayerh* was the paddy loans from the jotedar for which the sharecropper had to pay 2 maunds¹⁵⁰ as interest for every 4 maunds of paddy loan. *Khamar Chilani* was sharecroppers share in the payment to the person who cleaned the threshing floor after the harvest which amounted to 5 seers of paddy per bigha. After threshing was complete, the person who measured and divided the share was called *koyal* and for that service the tiller had to dispense off 5 seers of paddy per head (*koyali*). Apart from these, for festivals and

¹⁴⁸ Bhupal Panda, "Medinipurer Tebhaga Sangram", in *Tebhagar Agnikanya: Bimala Maji*, eds., Biplab Maji and Mukti Mukhopadhyay (Howrah: Sahajpath, 2017), 19-20.

¹⁴⁹ Bhupal Panda, "Medinipurer Tebhaga Sangram", 20.

¹⁵⁰ 1 maund = 37.33 kgs; for rice – 40 kgs approx.

marriages in the house of jotedar, the tiller had to pay costs in the form of *parboni* and *lagdi* respectively, the amount of which was decided by the jotedar.¹⁵¹ The practice of *sanja* in Midnapore has already been discussed earlier. Thus, we can see that apart from the normal discrimination regarding share of paddy, the tiller had to part with his meagre share in various other obligations putting him in perpetual shortage and in bondage to the jotedar. In Nandigram this was specifically notorious leading to the spread of the movement in this area.

The role of women activists during this period deserves special mention. Manikuntala Sen, Gita Mukherjee (wife of Biswanath Mukherjee), Usha Chakrabarti, Sadhana Patra and Bimala Maji are notable names in this regard. Manikuntala Sen's role in training Bimala Maji who would become a frontline leader in the Tebhaga movement was significant. Sen, a member of the Provincial Women's Self Defence League was sent to Midnapore with the task of organising women into *samitis*. Krishak samitis were already taking shape but women of peasant households did not directly participate in such samitis. It was necessary that women understood the state of agriculture, nature of wages and exploitation so that they could fight alongside the men in the struggle for justice.¹⁵² The main aim was to create public connect and the famine relief actions provided the opportunity towards the same. Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Marwari Relief Society, Ramkrishna Mission and various other institutions set up relief centres distributing clothes and blanket to the affected people and the Communists instituted People's Relief Committees to do the same. The women samitis set up relief kitchens and milk distribution centres. The People's Relief Committees distributed food, medicines, milk, baby food to women, while doctors associated with them used to visit the villages and provide first aid and nursing training to women engaged in the relief centres. Adult education centres were set up in various villages to deal with the problem of illiteracy and teach basic reading and writing skills. The self-defence centres set up by Sen and Maji helped women deal with issues of domestic abuse. Income opportunities for women in the form of making mats and bamboo handicrafts were set up by the women samitis. The samitis also set up a system of *dheki* labour (paddles for husking paddy operated exclusively by women) where the women obtained paddy from the godowns of big owners, processed and sold the product after which they repaid the supplying landlords. The samitis gave guarantees to the landlords who in return provided the

¹⁵¹ Biplab Maji, "Communist Andolone Maa" in *Tebhagar Agnikanya: Bimala Maji*, 71-73.

¹⁵² Manikuntala Sen, "Sediner Katha", in *Tebhagar Agnikanya: Bimala Maji*, 14.

paddy. This particular programme had a double result of enabling destitute women to feed their own families and at the same time they became samiti members.

Peter Custers notes that the participation of the rural poor women in the Tebhaga uprising was quite creative. They not only operated the warning system and were vigilant against police raids on their homesteads but often devised various inventive measures to divert attention of the police and to protect cadres targeted for arrest. Another important aspect was the way in which women gained agency in a social structure steeped in patriarchy and feudalism. The most striking and specific experience of Nandigram was the way in which the women armed with red flags, brooms and spice powders marched into the fields and harvested the paddy.¹⁵³

Just like reaction to any other movement, the repression by police and the jotedars was massive. This along with the dynamics of independence and ban on the Communist Party in 1948 fizzled out the movement. Despite its short span, this movement set the trajectory of future communist organisation and mobilisation in the district.

Legitimacy of the Left forces at the Cost of Congress in Rural Bengal

The discussion attempted in the sections above is a humble one given the myriad complex dynamics both in terms of structure and agency as it unfolded over the decades. The land question as settled by the Permanent Settlement and the associated agrarian structure and relations as it evolved was the single biggest continuity at the turn of the century. The decline of the zamindars, rise of the jotedars and the resultant exploitation of the sharecropper and agricultural labour dominate all scholarly discussions and party positions on the agrarian structure. The Indian National Congress which was the leading national political actor at the beginning of the 20th century did not delve seriously into the land question and this dilemma of the Congress stemming from its dependence on the landed class provided the breathing space for the Left forces to gain ground. The Communist Party of India as it emerged used the structure and front organisations of the Congress to gain ground among the people. A very pertinent question that can be raised at this point – how did the Left gain legitimacy in rural Bengal and became principal agents of engagement at the grassroot level over the years?

¹⁵³ Peter Custers, “An Interview with Bimala Majee”, in *Tebhagar Agnikanya: Bimala Maji*, 27.

The answer to this lies in the concepts formulated by Partha Chatterjee and later on supplemented by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya. Though the concept has been formulated in the post-independence context much later than the period of study focused here, it is a significant analytical tool to answer this question. Chatterjee in his concept of ‘political society’ focused on the mediatory nature of the Left politics. Writing in 1997 on the electoral dominance of CPI(M) over the years, he comments

“The point is rather that a field of political transactions has been opened which is within the reach of most villagers and where matters of local interest can be negotiated and sorted out on a day-to-day basis. It is in that field that the CPI(M), with its permanently mobilised corps of workers, enjoys an advantage in the matter of the daily renewal of the legitimacy of power.”¹⁵⁴

Chatterjee notes that the emergence of mass democracies produced a new distinction between ‘citizens’ and ‘population’. The concept of citizen is linked to participation in sovereignty of the state while the population is target of policies – economic, administrative, law and political mobilisation. The legitimacy of a government or a party is not dependent on citizen participation but is linked to wellbeing claims for the population.¹⁵⁵ The category of population constitutes the concept of political society which can include refugees, landless people, labourers and the lot below poverty line i.e. the poor and marginal population who were historically excluded from civil society due to lack of access to education, wealth, social and cultural capital and did not have access to basic rights entitled to the citizens. In rural Bengal, the Left with their land reform demands, democratic local government in the villages, tightly disciplined party organisation performed mediatory and negotiation functions well thereby creating sources of local support from population groups.¹⁵⁶

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya notes that political society as a conceptual tool helps in understanding popular politics outside legal-judicial and institutional domains of government. However, noting that Chatterjee’s theoretical formulation was set in an urban and semi -urban setting like pavement hawkers, slum dwellers etc, Bhattacharyya applied this idea in the rural setting. He emphasised the dominance of political parties as the main channel of public transaction in the socio-political sphere of rural Bengal. Such was the nature of party

¹⁵⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 160-161.

¹⁵⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34.

¹⁵⁶ Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, 64.

penetration in the grassroots, that all familial, social and cultural confrontations assumed partisan lines. Party intervention in the family matters also became common. Bhattacharyya conceptualised this mediatory role of political parties as ‘party society’. In political society, the population groups converge around shared interests in the shape of a community while in party society they tend to bond into a political group, thereby splitting communities on partisan lines.¹⁵⁷ On the question of the evolution of party society, Bhattacharyya notes that party society has its roots in the violent class-based movements of rural peasants as they fought against the landlords. The Left parties facilitated all the movements for food, land, rents and interests and created new opportunities for the excluded. The movements combined material deprivations and symbolic representation, as the rural poor belonging to dalit, tribal or minority communities were mobilised for social justice against indignity and humiliation, with the Left parties providing an alternative. The Communist Party’s increase of influence in the rural areas was basically because of the dedication of a group of leftist youth who mostly came to the villages from outside and mobilised peasants on local issues of economic exploitation or social exclusion. The educated youth who left comforts of urban life and took up the cause generated both inspiration and transformation.¹⁵⁸ From his surveys¹⁵⁹, he came to the conclusion that legislative steps have limits and reform laws do not work unless backed by political will at the ground level. This was the ‘party-driven governmentalization of the local.’¹⁶⁰

Common people need spaces of dependence especially rural masses who need extra assistance is grievance redressal because of lack of awareness on one hand and lack of easy systemic access. Account of activities and movements of the Midnapur District Congress prove that they were able to provide the space for people to fall back on in times of crisis. Like other parts of Bengal, the rise of the Left in the district can also be attributed to factors like building up of local resistances against injustice or extensive relief work in times of crisis, when the state failed. The arrest of the Congress leaders of Midnapore who militantly fought against the

¹⁵⁷ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 126-127.

¹⁵⁸ In the later parts of this work, when we look into peasant mobilisation in Midnapore during the Naxalite decades, this trend will be starkly visible as well.

¹⁵⁹ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Manabi Majumdar conducted three field based studies in six villages on the consolidation of party society framework and its effects during the period 2005-2006 –Sitai (Coochbehar), Uttar Harishchandrapur (Malda), Jagatpur (South 24 Parganas), Chatma (Purulia), Galsi (Bardhaman) and Adhata (North 24 Parganas). Though the studies conducted are of later periods, the conceptual application is relevant for earlier periods as well in understanding the popularity and legitimacy of the left forces in their formative years as well

¹⁶⁰ For detailed account on ‘party society’, see Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 127-154.

district administration in sharp contrast to the provincial party line and more in line with the communist strategy of action, allowed the Communist Party to fill in the gap post 1942. Within a short span of time, the 'population' and 'party society' changed colours from the Indian National Congress to the Communist Party of India.

Chapter 4

Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s: An Overview of the Revolutionary Situation with Special Emphasis on its Impact on Students-Youths

The condition of Bengal immediately after independence was complex. The problems and challenges here were more severe than other regions for a variety of historical events and reasons. The state had to contend with series of issues like war operations in and around Calcutta, devastating famine and communal riots of August 1946. The partition led to influx of millions of refugees which added to its high population density index. The partition also cut off the supply of food from East Bengal creating serious shortages in the West and the supply of jute also dwindled leaving the jute industry without raw materials. Transportation and communication networks were also disrupted. Formation of a stable government post-independence proved to be a problem, as the state Congress was in a total disarray especially after the exit of Subhash Chandra Bose in 1939, when a large number of his followers left the party strengthening the hands of the Leftist forces. Also, it must be noted that pre-independence, it was not the Congress but the Krishak Praja Party followed by the Muslim League that had formed the ministries. The central command placed Prafulla Ghosh in charge but by January 1948 he was replaced by Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy backed by support from the Arambagh group of Prafulla Sen and Hooghly group of Atulya Ghosh.

On the other hand, the Communist Party of India was faced with the dilemma of adjusting its revolutionary tactic to survive in a parliamentary set up. The transition from the revolutionary to the electoral path and formation of ministry in 1967, with 13 other political parties from a wide ideological spectrum, was the culmination of a lot of internal debates, policies and resultant controversies. The first reaction among most communists at the eve of independence was to continue with the policy of violence. The Party did not participate in the Independence Day celebrations and given its assessment of the Congress as an agent of imperialism and feudalism, declared the independence achieved as sham. With the slogan ‘*yeh azadi jhooti hai*’ (this freedom is a lie), they adopted the insurrectionary line and called for armed struggle against the new government. This line was officially adopted in the Second Congress of the CPI held at Calcutta (February 28- March 6, 1948). The *Political Thesis* produced in the Congress popularly known as the *Calcutta Thesis* claimed:

The establishment of the Central Government headed by Pandit Nehru has not solved a single problem of the democratic revolution. Its establishment does not mean that the Indian people have won either freedom or independence, nor does it ensure that they will be moving in the direction of democracy and freedom for the people...¹

The Party congress called for building up a Democratic Front of all Leftist forces – parties and front organisations – to fight against the bourgeoisie- feudal front represented by the Congress, to lead and unify struggles of workers, peasants and other toilers. The aims of the revolution were laid down as follows,

The aim of the People's Democratic Revolution is to bring about those fundamental changes in our political and social structure, without which there can be no freedom and no prosperity for our common people. The present State will be replaced by a People's Democratic Republic – a republic of workers, peasants and oppressed middle classes. The bureaucratic administration will be dissolved and will be replaced by officials elected by the people, controlled by their committees and subject to recall. Landlordism will be abolished and land given to the tillers. All big banks and factories will be taken over by the State and run in the interest of the people and not for the profits of the few. Princely autocracy will be ended and the States' people freed from feudal and capitalist shackles.²

The tasks on the peasant front as noted by the *Thesis* needs special mention here. 'Land to the tiller' as an ultimate demand was reiterated once again in the following words:

Landlordism of all forms must be liquidated without any compensation to the landlords, *khas* land of the landlords and rich peasants must be distributed amongst the toiling peasants, and all forms of feudal and semi -feudal exactions must go. The fight against eviction, against rent, against serfdom to the money-lender, for commutation of rent in kind into money, and for two-thirds share of the crop must be strengthened and developed into the fight for land to the tillers.³

The main proponent of this radical line was B.T Ranadive, who had replaced P.C Joshi as General Secretary in 1948. This period saw insurgencies in Tripura, Travancore and Telengana. In West Bengal unrest was witnessed both in urban and rural areas. In Calcutta trams, buses and trains were bombed, houses of ministers burnt, Congress party offices and leaders attacked and an attempt was made to blow up Calcutta Water Works. With intensified police repression, activities shifted to the rural areas in the latter half of 1949. Five southern districts in close proximity to Calcutta became the centre of action – Bankura, Burdwan, Midnapore, Howrah

¹ Communist Party of India, *Political Thesis of the Communist Party of India* (1948), 25, accessed June 10, 2023, https://ia601804.us.archive.org/4/items/cpi2_20201216/cpi2.pdf.

² Communist Party of India, *Political Thesis*, 88.

³ Communist Party of India, *Political Thesis*, 97.

and 24 Parganas. The party encouraged sharecroppers, poor cultivators and landless labourers to seize crops, loot wealthy homes and raid government food stocks. Activities were intense in the remote areas of Bankura and in Kakdwip, Lyalganj, Sandeshkhali and Canning regions of 24 Parganas. However, this phase did not witness any mass revolutionary upsurge. Faced with government repression and subsequent ban on the Party in March 1948 and arrest of the leaders, the activities fizzled out. The membership of the party dropped drastically from 89,263 to 20,000 in 1950. It again increased to 125000 in 1957 after change in strategy from insurrectionary line to electoral line.⁴

The performance of the Party in the 1952 elections brought hopes for the success of the electoral line and it participated subsequently in the 1957 and 1962 elections. The increase of seats across the elections in West Bengal can be noted in this context.

Table 4.1
ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF CONGRESS AND CPI IN WEST BENGAL
(1952-1962)

Party	Legislative Assembly			Lok Sabha		
	1952	1957	1962	1952	1957	1962
Congress	150	152	157	24	23	23
CPI	28	46	50	5	6	8

Source: Marcus F. Franda, "West Bengal", in *State Politics in India*, ed., Myron Weiner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 275.

While evaluating the election performance, the Party document titled *On the Results of the General Elections and the Tasks before the Party* (April 1952), expressed its jubilation in the following words,

Not merely have the broad masses moved away from the Congress, not merely have the majority of them moved to the Left but inside the camp of the democratic masses, the Communist Party has become the strongest single factor, the most powerful challenge to the Congress. Even the worst enemies of the Party are forced to recognise this. The Party stands forth today as the first party of the Andhra people, as the most powerful force in Kerala, as the Party that has the backing of the overwhelming majority of the people in Tripura, as the Party which constitutes the main opposition to the Congress in Bengal, as the Party which is rapidly growing in Orissa in Punjab, as the Party which people all over the country consider to be the Party of the future.⁵

⁴Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 357.

⁵ Communist Party of India, *On the Results of the General Elections and the Tasks before the Party* (April 1952), 8, accessed June 9, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/india/cpi/1952-election-results.pdf>.

In its evaluation regarding victory, the Party analysis noted that impressive victories were won where they boldly led mass struggles in the face of terror and repression, claimed to be leader of the people by championing the cause of the masses depicting self-sacrifice and heroism, developed a broad peasant movement or a powerful trade union movement and were unified in their struggles as a team. Adoption of flexible 'United Front' tactics, signifying the Party's priority of subordinating everything to the supreme task of defeating the Congress had been a successful strategy. The analysis further noted that success was achieved where election campaign was developed into a broader popular movement with the slogan for an alternative government and provincial units brought out their own manifestos with a positive and concrete programme of agitation.⁶

The United Front strategy regards special mention in the context of West Bengal. The Party analysis here acknowledged the complexity of forging electoral alliances with other parties and groups and that it demanded flexibility on its part. United Front was always desirable with Leftist parties that accepted the goal of socialism and mostly claiming to be Marxists but such fronts were not broad enough to draw the masses or defeat the Congress. Hence the strategy noted was to exclude communal parties and those backed by feudal and counter-revolutionary forces but include all parties, groups and individuals who opposed the Congress from a progressive and democratic standpoint.⁷ Formation of 1967 United Front government was an expression of this strategy.

Apart from performance in the elections being a factor other international factors like improving India- USSR relations, 20th Congress of the CPSU where Khrushchev put forward his idea of 'peaceful coexistence' with the capitalist bloc added to the loss in relevance of the insurrectionary line. The official party line on constitutional communism can be traced to the Special Congress of the CPI held at Amritsar in 1958. The Party, facing criticisms and suspicions regarding participation in elections due to their opposite stance in 1948, felt the need to clarify their position. On the question that whether the adoption of 'peaceful means' was a 'creed' or a 'tactic', the Party stated it to be neither and exhorted it to be a 'seriously meant policy'. The Party document stated,

We consider that in the present historical condition, the possibility exists in many countries of achieving Socialism peacefully and of defeating attempts of the ruling classes to force civil war on the people. The possibility exists of parties and elements

⁶ Communist Party of India, *On the Results of the General Elections*, 15.

⁷ Communist Party of India, *On the Results of the General Elections*, 19.

who stand for Socialism securing a majority in Parliament and overcoming the resistance of reaction by means of mass action. And we shall try out utmost to make this possibility a reality in our country.⁸

The CPI was not free of internal factionalism. The change in stance of the Party towards the Union Government and especially the decision to participate in elections was bound to have its repercussions. From 1958 to 1964, the CPI membership in West Bengal became almost institutionally divided between three factions- Rightists led by Bhowani Sen and Somnath Lahiri who were mainly intellectuals and theoreticians of the state party, Leftists led by Pramode Dasgupta and Harekrishna Konar who were opposed to central party directives with the bulk of radical members and Centrists led nominally by Jyoti Basu and Bhupesh Gupta which mediated between the other two and formed the party's pro-election faction. After the split in 1964 the Right assumed control of regular CPI, the Left formed the CPI (M) and Centrists were divided in both with the majority joining the CPI(M).⁹

The split between CPI and CPI (M) is dated from April 11, 1964, when 32 out of 65 members of the Party's National Council walked out from a meeting in New Delhi. They organised their own Convention in Tenali, Andhra Pradesh in July and National Congress in Calcutta in October. The Bengal unit played a central role in the split as six members out of the thirty-two who walked out were Pramode Dasgupta, Jyoti Basu, Harekrishna Konar, Muzaffar Ahmed, Abdul Halim and Saroj Mukherjee. The split can be traced to a series of international, national and regional dynamics. The most prominent and publicised factors were the widening rift between CPSU and Communist Party of China (CPC), Tibetan revolt, Sino-Indian border dispute and war. The Chinese aggression in 1962 created serious disunity within the CPI in West Bengal and the majority of the West Bengal unit voted against the National Council resolution titled *Unite to Defend the Motherland against China's Open Aggression* which was in line with the Congress interpretation. The Resolution was endorsed only by two powerful district committees – Calcutta led by Jolly Kaul and Midnapore led by Biswanath Mukherjee. Consequently, the Party's State Council was dissolved, numerous leaders were put in jail, and the Party Central Executive transferred authority and responsibilities to the Rightist-leaning, seven-member Provincial Organising Committee, which operated throughout 1963. In early 1964 the pro-Peking Leaders of the CPI were released from jail and they immediately held a meeting to re-establish the State Council under their dominance and the resultant tension

⁸Ajoy Ghosh, *Amritsar Congress of the Communist Party* (New Delhi, India: Communist Party Publication, 1958), 92, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/india/cpi/58-ghosh.pdf>.

⁹Marcus F. Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1971), 85.

culminated in the split. The CPI(M) took with it the bulk of active membership and the electoral support, as evident from the percentage of votes polled in the Legislative Assembly elections.

Table 4.2

PERCENTAGE OF VALID VOTES POLLED BY COMMUNIST PARTIES IN WEST BENGAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS (1952-1969)

Year	CPI	CPI (M)
1952	10.4	-
1957	17.8	-
1962	25.0	-
1967	6.53	18.11
1969	6.78	19.55

Source: Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics*, 91.

However, the Right faction was declining in influence in the wider society. The main reason was the socio-political climate from the 1950s with huge number of young members joining the party that preferred the Left, given its militant nature which appealed to the young mind. The organisation of the CPI under Dasgupta was similar to the structure of Anushilan Samity and had a membership well versed in radical activities. The nature of politics during this period required mass scale organisation for agitational purposes on various issues. The strength of the Communist and Marxist-Left parties¹⁰ rested on their pursuit of non-electoral political strategies, one of which was revolutionary while the other being influence through protest. The Communist Party had been highly successful in initiating, or taking advantage of, processions, hartals, strikes, boycotts, and, on numerous occasions, riots and violence, fostering a revolutionary spirit in turbulent times. Also, the Communists and the Marxist-Leftists made frequent use of the legislature, particularly the question hour, adjournment motions and budget debates, to reveal instances of corruption and inefficiency on the part of the government that questioned the legitimacy of the regime. A number of actions of the CPI, and almost all the actions of the Marxist-Left parties, had intended to give vent to the dissatisfaction of inadequately represented sections of the population. The adoption of revolutionary and protest

¹⁰ The four largest Marxist-Left parties were also the four oldest: the Revolutionary Socialist party (RSP) arose out of the Anushilan terrorist organisation, which changed its name in 1930 to the Hindustan Republican Army, then to the Hindustan Republican Socialist Army, and finally in 1938, to the Revolutionary Socialist party. The Revolutionary Communist party of India (RCPI) was founded in 1934 by Saumyendranath Tagore, the grandnephew of Rabindranath Tagore, when he broke with the CPI. The Bolshevik party of India had as its predecessor a group called the Bengal Labour party, created in 1933 by N. Dutt Mazumdar, a young Bengali who had been deeply impressed by Marxist ideas as a student at the London School of Economics. The Forward Bloc, the largest of the Marxist-left parties, was founded in 1939 by Subhas Bose in an attempt to unite all leftist groups in Congress against the Congress party policy of the day. For a detailed description of the Marxist-left parties in Bengal, see Myron Weiner, ed., *State Politics in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 117-138.

strategies through the 1950s to the 1970s, was particularly responsible for the Left's success in attracting a large section of the Bengali urban middle class, most particularly the students and organised demonstrations have been the most violent and the most effective when they involved these middle-class students.¹¹

Deliberations across the literature on this period point at the nature of the public mood that provided the radical impetus to the Left forces. Hence, an overview of the context, popular protests and politics, collective claim making, activism networks and the way in which the decade of the 1950s flow into the 1960s and 1970s is noteworthy as a prelude to understanding the dynamics of Naxalbari movement.

The Stormy Decades of 1950s-1960s: A Prelude to Naxalbari

The Urban scene:

While interviewing leaders of the Naxalite uprising in Midnapore like Ashim Chatterjee and Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, one important point that seemed to recur in all their narratives was that they were influenced and triggered to dive head long into the uncertainties of the revolutionary life by the political climate prevailing at that time. To be more precise they referred to the revolutionary situation or "*biplober joggo poristhiti*"¹² in Bengal. Dasgupta talks about the importance of objective conditions that determined their actions like economic crisis, political crisis and most importantly the sense of deprivation, frustration, anger and hatred triggered by starvation. According to him all discontent flared up on this issue. Sumanta Banerjee also makes a similar observation while talking about the rural scene in the 1960s. In his words,

In the middle of March 1967, some Bengali newspapers carried a small news item about one Mukunda Sarkar, an unemployed worker, in a village called Dharmapur in Bongaon in West Bengal. Unable to feed his wife and three children, he killed them and then committed suicide. Sarkar's case was not an isolated instance. All through 1966 and 1967, rumblings of discontent reverberated throughout the Indian countryside. Reports poured into newspaper offices of horrors of chronic malnutrition, deaths from starvation. Self-annihilation by hungry and desperate peasants and sporadic pillaging of food godowns by men in rags and tatters.¹³

¹¹ Franda, "West Bengal" in Myron Weiner, 289-290.

¹² Ashim Chatterjee, interviewed by the author (Kolkata: September 8, 2021); Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, interviewed by the author (Jhargram: March 10, 2021).

¹³ Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984), 1; See *Jugantar*, May 30 & 31, 1967 for horrific images of malnourished children and news of starvation in Bankura and Purulia.

Urban issues included a growing population, lack of food, rising unemployment, expansion of slums, deteriorating hygienic conditions and a steady decline in living standards. Calcutta served as a clear example of urban congestion. Slums, epidemic outbreaks like cholera which killed a large number of people in the city in 1958, and youth unemployment, the majority of whom were in their prime, created the ideal environment for discontent to flourish. Decline in the market for products of the industrial sector was unavoidable due to food shortages and high costs due to crop failures and hoarding. The workforce was severely impacted by the industrial recession. Thousands of workers were laid off across establishments and many concerns closed down totally. The urban middle classes, consisting mainly of the white-collar employees in the tertiary sector, were also affected by price rise. On one hand, there was the war situation with military expenditure increasing in leaps and bounds from 280.9 crore in 1960-61 to 867 crores in 1963-64.¹⁴ On the other hand, the basic living standards were beyond reach of the people. As Frankel notes, even before the China war, no more than top 40% of the total population could afford per capita monthly expenditure of Rs. 20 only and this amount at 1960-1961 prices was the minimum needed for the purchase of only food grains, clothing and fuel sufficient to rise above abject poverty. A per-capita minimum consumer expenditure of approximately Rs.35 per month could provide for a balanced diet together with a modest standard of consumption of other items but this did not include any expenditure on health and education. According to estimates made by the Indian Planning Commission in 1960-61, after the first decade of planning, fifty to sixty percent of the rural population, or approximately 211 million people, could not afford minimum levels of consumption, calculated primarily in terms of calorie intake necessary to avoid the onset of malnutrition.¹⁵ The Planning Commission estimates also reveal that the per-capita daily average income of 2/3 of India's population was only 7.5 annas which is about Rs. 14 per month which was much less than what was required to rise above abject poverty.¹⁶ Such was the overall nature of crisis that it had hit all strata of the society and even people and professions including doctors, teachers better known for rule-based activities displayed unpredictable behaviour. Student unrest linked to these general socio-economic problems was another common feature of the urban scene to be discussed shortly in another section of the chapter.

Ranabir Samaddar notes that to appreciate the nature of the Naxalite decade, it is necessary to view it in the perspective of the history it grew from, the history it was part of and the history

¹⁴ Francine Frankel, *India's Political Economy 1947-77: The Gradual Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 217-218.

¹⁵ Frankel, *India's Political Economy*, 4.

¹⁶ Frankel, *India's Political Economy*, 223.

that it created.¹⁷ He talks about the popular roots of Naxalite movement and the historical and political resources that the Naxalites drew upon like the refugee movement, tram movement, teachers' movement and most importantly food movements, providing it with the legitimacy of being a movement for the people. All these movements demonstrate how certain patterns of agitational politics, mass mobilisation, street demonstrations, development of trust networks along lines of community and fellow suffering contributed to the radicalisation of mood and thought patterns in these decades of all those, who attempted to translate their dreams of a better existence into reality facing the wrath of the state bullet.

For anyone residing in Bengal, the memories and tales of millions of people changing sides of national borders after partition is quite vivid. Not only was the struggle to start a new life from scratch economically and socially taxing, but also the accompanying psychological trauma was huge. Bengal was unprepared for the enormous influx. The result was innumerable refugee camps with lack of space, food and hygiene. Faced with such conditions, the refugees began organising themselves to pressurise the government to ameliorate their conditions. Fronts like *Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad* (All Bengal Homeless Action Council), Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council (RCRC) and United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) came up of which the last one was most popular. The UCRC was an amalgamation of CPI, Forward Bloc, RSP etc. It mobilised on various issues related to land like slum clearance, eviction, rehabilitation etc.¹⁸ With the UCRC, Left politics became central to the refugee demands. The tram agitation of 1953, which was sparked by the Calcutta Tram Company's hike in second class tram fares by one paisa, was the next significant event. Following the formation of the Tram Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee, thousands of passengers resisted paying the higher rates. Teachers and students also participated in the demonstration. Before this agitation could show signs of settling, secondary school teachers went on strike on February 10, 1954, demanding higher pay. This movement too gained support from various quarters. The Communist Party formally extended support to the movement. So did others like Forward Bloc as well as other non-left parties leading to formation of an All-Parties Teachers' Struggle Coordination Committee. The All-Bengal Teachers Association (ABTA) also appealed to the UCRC for support and received the same. General sympathy of students, city intellectuals,

¹⁷ Ranabir Samaddar ed., *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2018), 11.

¹⁸ Paula Banerjee and Sucharita Sengupta, "The Refugee Movement: A Founding Moment of Popular Movements", in *From Popular Movements to Rebellion*, ed. Samaddar, 28-38.

common people, working class coincided in all cases with rallies, meetings and sit-in protests becoming common sight.¹⁹

Left popular politics reached its peak with the food movements. With partition of India and the mass influx of refugees in Bengal, it was quite obvious that providing food would be a herculean task for the state. Sibaji Pratim Basu notes that, historically the food movements of 1959 and 1966 have their own unique existences but they can be seen as a continuum, a legacy that started in the post- 1943 period after the Great Bengal Famine, passed through the Tebhaga movement to the movements over corrupt and inadequate public distribution system between 1956 and 1958. It continued through the first half of the 1960s and reached its zenith in 1966.²⁰ The gap between production, procurement and distribution in the public distribution system along with black-marketing and hoarding created near famine situation in rural Bengal by late 1950s.

The total food output in West Bengal in 1948 was officially estimated to be 36 lakh tons of which 31% was earmarked to be sold through the public distribution system but the government procurement figure of 467000 tons was inadequate to maintain the rationing system. The situation rapidly deteriorated in the coming years when only 135000, 170000, 270000 tons of food grains were distributed through the public distribution system respectively in 1950, 1951 and 1952. People in the rural sector were largely left at the mercy of hoarders and the black-market for access to food.²¹ The situation can be summed up in the clarion call for popular uprising given out in an editorial of 9 July 1959 of the *Swadhinata*,

There is no other way. Hence the struggle! There is no dearth of food in our state, but still the people of towns and villages have been compelled to buy rice at Rs.30-33 per maund. In the rural area the supply of ration is almost stopped. There is no food in the deficit and distressed areas and no provision for test relief work for the poor landless labourers and unemployed. In the distressed areas people are dying of starvation. The agriculture is in severe crisis. The peasants are without any work or money. People in the towns and villages, peasants, workers, middle and lower middle class, all strata of the society have been shattered because of the food crisis. People of West Bengal know quite well that the Congress Government and its food policy are fully responsible for their destitute condition. They also know that only by hitting the Government hard, time and again, they could be forced to do at least something...²²

¹⁹ Anwesha Sengupta, "Anti Tram Fare Rise and Teachers' Movement in Calcutta 1953-54", in *From Popular Movements to Rebellion*, ed. Samaddar, 49-65.

²⁰ Sibaji Pratim Basu, "The Defining Moments of Left-Popular Politics: The Food Movements of 1959 and 1966", in *From Popular Movements to Rebellion*, ed. Samaddar, 86.

²¹ Suranjan Das and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay, eds., *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting A Turning Point in The History of West Bengal* (Kolkata: K P Bagchi, 2004), x.

²² Cited in Das and Bandyopadhyay, *Food Movement of 1959*, xii.

The Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC) was formed on initiative by the CPI for mass mobilisation. From August 1959 onwards, Calcutta and Howrah became the centre of rallies, protests and confrontations which began after the PIFRC gave the call for a three-day general strike in August. The 1966 movement was more spontaneous and focus this time was on the districts most prominently in Swarupnagar and Basirhat areas (24 Parganas, currently North 24 Parganas). The rise in price of rice and scarcity of kerosene fuelled the movement. What added fuel to the fire was the comment by the then Chief Minister, Prafulla Chandra Sen who stated in the context of rice shortage that people should change their food habits and replace rice with wheat or flour and also argued that people can live on green bananas as it had more nutrition content than potatoes.²³ Clashes between authorities and protestors and death of many protestors in such struggles occurred throughout February and March 1966. By the end of the year, the political climate of entire Bengal was quite a radical one setting the stage for the next major event of May 1967.

The Rural Scene:

The account of the rural scene can begin with the effects of the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953. The Act had aimed to abolish intermediary classes in Bengal and had declared individual holding of agricultural land in excess of 25 acres and non-agricultural land in excess of 20 acres as illegal. Ladejinsky notes that with extreme mal-distribution of land, with nearly a quarter of the households owing no land at all and another one-fifth owning less than one acre each, use of land ceiling as a means of redressing imbalance was rational but in application the policy suffered on various counts across the country. The purpose was to secure maximum excess land for redistribution but the clauses of retentions and exemptions defeated the purpose. For instance, in Bengal, lands under tanks, fisheries, orchards, forests and land held by religious and charitable institutions were kept outside the scope of ceiling thereby providing scope to hide property. Topping these exemptions were legal and illegal (benami transfers i.e. transferring part of possessions to fictitious names) land transfers both in anticipation and after the enactment of the ceiling laws. As a result, very little land was available for redistribution. To quote Ladejinsky,

Between the early 1960s and the end of 1970, the states of Bihar, Mysore, Kerala and Orissa have not contributed a single acre of surplus land. In all of Andhra Pradesh only 1,400 acres have been taken over, and none distributed. The big state of Tamil Nadu contributed so little of declared and distributed surplus land that its performance is only marginally better than that of the non-contributors. The list can be extended, pointing in more or less the same direction. Kashmir, a relatively small state, is the one exception

²³ Basu, "The Defining Moments of Left-Popular Politics", 100-101.

where all of the declared surplus land (190,000 hectares and the biggest contribution) was actually distributed. The same cannot be said about West Bengal; in this state surcharged with radical politics only 40 per cent of the declared surplus was distributed. Summing it up for India as a whole, by the end of 1970 the "declared surplus" was only 2.4 million acres and "area distributed" just half of that, or 0.3 of one per cent of the total cultivated land of India.²⁴

There were issues with the government's tenancy reform initiatives as well. Tenancy reform sought to provide tenants security of tenancy and control over the amount of rent they paid. However, the landlords or big farmers had advantages over the underprivileged tenants. The time gap between announcement of the plans and their passage into law in numerous states gave the landlords enough time to prepare and implement the necessary safety measures. The proposed regulations allowed tenants to occupy the land they leased after a set amount of time. Thereafter landlords used mass evictions to keep tenants from using their new rights. As previously indicated, because they were primarily dependent on their landlords for their livelihood, the tenants were unable to take advantage of the new law's protections. Not even those who were officially registered as tenants had the financial means to pursue a case and wait for the verdict indefinitely. One of the reasons for the failure was the gap in the state legislation that allowed zamindars to reclaim land for their own personal farming, remove tenants and use hired labour to cultivate the property thereby resulting in swelling numbers of agricultural labourers.

K.D Malaviya, former Congress minister of Mining and Fuel, in his analysis of reforms in an article in the *Socialist Congressman* (May 1, 1964) noted,

The numerous official and unofficial surveys (carried out during the last ten years) of the results of the implementations of agrarian laws, the working of Community Projects and other national development services and farm -cooperatives, show irrefutably that it is the upper strata and not the masses of the rural population that have mostly benefited...

The numerous village studies made during the past decade have shown convincingly that in carrying out the agrarian reforms the basic aim of Congress- the transfer of land to those who till it- has not been achieved. These studies show irrefutably that the process of the concentration of economic might in the form of land, cattle, implements, capital, etc., at one end of the social ladder, and poverty at the other, is still continuing. Some 7 to 8 per cent of the rural population owned half the land while more than 80% of the rural population have either no land at all or have a plot of less than two acres, which means they live in hopeless poverty. About a third of the cultivated land is rented and about 40 per cent of the gainfully employed section of the rural population spend part of their time working for wages.²⁵

²⁴ Wolf Ladejinsky, "Land Ceilings and Land Reform", *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, no. 5/7 (February, 1972): 403.

²⁵ Cited in Charles Bettelheim, *India Independent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 231-232.

Thus, we see that the basic problem of ownership of land was not solved by agrarian legislations and there was no fundamental change in the property structure of the rural society. As Suniti Kumar Ghosh notes, the intention of the land reforms was to sow illusions among the peasantry and divert them from the path of class struggle. In one of his speeches at the Nagpur session of the Congress held towards the end of the 1950s, the then Prime Minister Nehru said that ‘though the imposition of ceiling would affect only an infinitesimal minority of landlords, and though its actually practical gains would not be much, the sentimental gains would be tremendous.’²⁶ It was this failure that led to the Left propaganda that distribution of land from above by reform can hardly be carried out. For regeneration and complete transformation, the path of agrarian revolution with the peasantry confiscating all land of the landlords and excess lands of the rich peasants followed by land distribution on a more or less equal per capita basis was the solution.

The overall climate finds reflection in the following analysis of Sushital Roy Chowdhury, one of the founders of Committee for Struggle against Revisionism (*Antar Party Sodhanbad Birodhi Sangram Committee*) which was formed in early May 1967 with the objective to unite the radical communists within CPI (M), of the ‘present situation’ and the nature of the mass struggles,

The mass struggles of the recent times clearly show that our country has entered into a phase that marks the beginning of a revolutionary upsurge. The mood of the people of our country is day by day becoming revolutionary. The atmosphere is growing tense as a result of huge social upheaval taking place again and again... In the current year (1966) not a single month passed without the news being published of some section of the people coming into clash with the police in some part of the country or other. No doubt, the nature of these explosions is rather crude, yet their frequent recurrence unmistakably shows that they are nothing but the rumble of the approaching revolutionary tide.²⁷

He identifies the following special characteristics of the mass struggles,

(1) Even the movements for partial demands or for certain rights have to face hard unyielding attitude of the ruling classes. To fulfil even ordinary demands, people have to wage stubborn struggles. In most of the cases these movements are being confronted with the organised might of the ruling classes.

²⁶ All India Congress Committee, *Economic Review* (February 01, 1959), 23 cited in Suniti Kumar Ghosh, *Naxalbari Before and After: Reminiscences and Appraisal* (Kolkata: New Age 2009), 59.

²⁷ Sushital Roy Chowdhury, “Ranadive Tries to Deceive” in *The Historic Turning- Point: A Liberation Anthology, Vol I*, ed. Suniti Kumar Ghosh (Calcutta: 1993), 66-75. The article appeared in *Liberation*, Vol. I, No.1 (November 1967). This is the English rendering of an article which appeared in the Bengali weekly *Deshabrati* of August 10, 1967 in answer to Ranadive’s article, “‘Ultras’ Thesis: Inverted Advocacy of Congress Rule”, in *People’s Democracy* (July 16, 1967).

(2) The consciousness that is necessary to fight the entire system is fast growing. A feeling for change, if not class consciousness, is developing even among backward sections of the people, whose participation determines the sweep and intensity of any movement.

(3) The traditional weapon of the working class-the general strike- as a means of rousing the consciousness of the people, uniting them and drawing them into struggle-is growing popular.

(4) At the time when people wage united struggles- at the time when democratic mass movements spread, especially during general strikes and *hartals*- hundreds of hitherto unknown agitators emerge; the agitators, in reality, turnout to be very influential because they have the closest ties with the vast masses.

(5) ... A very significant feature noticeable during this struggles or clash is that the masses show a firm determination to carry forward the movements in the teeth of fierce police onslaught. People do not surrender easily. During these confrontations with the police, the people display ingenuity in devising various methods to weaken the enemy by returning every blow they receive...²⁸

This phase of mass struggles and resultant revolutionary spirit of the popular mood culminated in the Naxalbari incident and the events that followed.

The Road to Naxalbari: An Overview

On March 2, 1967 a non -Congress United Front government was sworn in West Bengal. The main constituents were CPI, CPI (M) and a breakaway group from the Congress – the Bangla Congress.²⁹

CPI (M) initially was not ready to strike alliances. It refused to join the Bangla Congress unlike CPI. In the 1967 elections which was fought over 280 single constituency seats, the CPI-Bangla Congress led People's United Left Front (PULF)³⁰ won 77 seats, CPI(M) led United

²⁸ Roy Chowdhury, "Ranadive Tries to Deceive", 66-75.

²⁹ Congress in Bengal was free of factionalism at first. 1950 saw the first split when Prafulla Chandra Ghosh resigned from Congress, formed Krishak Praja Mazdoor Party and eventually combined with Socialist Party at the national level to form Praja Socialist Party. The second major hit was in 1965. Dispute arose within the state Congress in July 1965, around the procedure that was to be used for enrolling members in the Midnapore district and state leadership was criticised for attempting to fill positions in the district with members loyal to Atulya Ghosh. Thus, the main protagonists of the dispute were Ghosh and Ajoy Mukherjee. Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee, born in Tamluk in 1901, was one of the leaders of *Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar* which came into effect during the Quit India Movement in 1942 and hence was quite popular in the district. At the time of the dispute, he was the leader of the district Congress unit and it was an important position given the fact that Midnapore was the second largest district in Bengal. It was the policies of Prafulla Chandra Sen's food policy and the reaction of Mukherjee who supported the Bangla Bandh in February-March 1966, brought the schism to its climax. Because of public criticism of Congress, he was expelled on June 18, 1966 resulting in the birth of Bangla Congress. Other leaders instrumental in this were Pranab Mukherjee, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, A.B.A Ghani Khan Chowdhury, all of whom returned to Congress subsequently. In 1971, there was a split resulting information of Biplobi Bangla Congress.

³⁰ Constituents of PULF were CPI, Bangla Congress, the Forward Bloc, the Praja Socialist Party, Lok Sevak Sangha, Gorkha League and Bolshevik Party; Constituents of ULF were CPI (M), Revolutionary Socialist Party, Socialist Unity Centre, Revolutionary Communist Party of India and the Forward Bloc – Marxist.

Left Front (ULF) won 74 seats and Congress won 127. CPI (M) and Bangla Congress had individually won 43 and 34 seats respectively. Despite CPI(M)'s intention to maintain radical image, the two joined hands forming United Front (UF) in March 1967 with Bangla Congress leader Ajoy Mukherjee becoming the CM and CPI (M) Politburo member Jyoti Basu becoming the deputy CM. After forming the government, CPI (M) was torn between administering from top and mobilisation from below. The Food and Agriculture minister Prafulla Chandra Ghosh clashed directly with CPI (M) and the Front broke from within. In November, 1967 Ghosh resigned and formed Progressive Democratic Front (PDF) with 16 other legislators. This was backed by the Congress and the UF government was forced to prove majority, which it failed on such short notice.

It must be noted here that the Naxalbari firing had already happened, the circumstances of which will be discussed shortly. The first UF ministry thus lasted only 8 months. The PDF government which took its place collapsed within days and President's rule was imposed on the state from February 20, 1968. In the February 1969 mid-term poll, a pre-poll alliance was forged by the Left parties named United Left Front. CPI (M) alone won 83 seats. The coalition won 214 seats out of 280. Ajoy Mukherjee became the CM and CPI(M) retained for themselves important portfolios like Home and General Administration, Land and Land Revenue, Refugee Rehabilitation and Labour. The agrarian tensions remained high and differences in opinion between CPIM and Bangla Congress on how to deal with it led again to resignation of Mukherjee, with the state going under President's rule again in April 1970.³¹

Thus, it is obvious that coalition ministries formed in West Bengal in 1967 and 1969 was quite difficult for all the parties involved. In other countries communist parties have come to power with the entire state apparatus in their hand but the communists in West Bengal formed ministries in 1967 and 1969, as a part of coalition with other political parties across diverse ideological spectrum. Also, the Communist Party became part of a government in a

³¹ Within the CPI (M) a schism had occurred in the context of Naxalbari where in April –May 1969, the breakaway CPI (Marxist-Leninist) had taken shape. In the 1971 assembly elections, the CPI(M) emerged as the largest party with 32.4% votes and 111 seats but government was formed by Ajoy Mukherjee (INC-Democratic Coalition) without the CPI(M) and lasted for only 87 days after which President's rule was imposed (June 1971-March 1972). The distance between CPI and CPI(M) also increased at this point. The CPI moved closer to the Congress because at that time the nationalist wave was high given Indira Gandhi's successful military action against Pakistan and other populist measures. In the 1972 elections the CPI (M) won only 14 seats and Congress unusually gained on seat count. INC –Progressive Democratic Alliance under Siddhartha Sankar Roy formed the government. The CPI(M) and its allies boycotted the Legislative Assembly for the next 5 years. Massive state repression combined with national emergency (June 1975 – March 1977) silenced all opposition forces. From April 1977- June 1977, President's rule remained in place in the state and in the 8th Assembly elections that was held in 1977, the CPI(M) formed the government that would last more than three decades.

parliamentary and asymmetrical federal framework with the Congress holding power at the centre. Disagreements were already in place regarding decision to contest elections. As Franda notes, the nature of election results in 1967 presented the CPI (M) with three alternatives – first, it could enter in a coalition in opposition to Congress by allying with the CPI and the Bangla Congress; secondly, to enter into a coalition against the CPI and the Bangla Congress by allying with the Congress party and third, it could go into opposition against all political parties in the state by refusing to join a coalition thus choosing to stay out of power. For the centrists in the CPI(M), the first alternative was clearly the least of the three evils.³²

The decision to participate in ministerial coalition was criticised by the Left faction groups in West Bengal who began to accuse the leadership of new revisionism. It may be recalled in this context that at the time of Sino-Indian conflict before the split, the majority of the Left wing within CPI was in jail. The imprisoned leaders in Dum Dum jail included Charu Mazumdar, Muzaffar Ahmed, Pramode Dasgupta, Jyoti Basu, Harekrishna Konar, Monoranjan Roy, Ganesh Ghosh among many others. Disagreements between Mazumdar and Konar on agrarian strategy can be traced to those jail days.³³ After his release from jail, Charu Mazumdar went back to Siliguri and started advocating the Maoist line of agrarian struggles and from 1965 published the documents propagating his ideas (to be discussed in the upcoming section), that would become the Naxal ideology appealing to the youth. A number of Leftist publications³⁴ were also in circulation during this period propagating the Mao line. The Calcutta State Committee publication *Deshhitoishi* editorial board members Sushital Roy Chowdhury, Saroj Dutta, Parimal Dasgupta, Asit Sen and others by early May 1967 had formed Committee for Struggle against Revisionism (*Antar Party Sodhanbad Birodhi Sangram Committee*) whose objective was to unite the radical communists. This became possible in the context of Naxalbari peasant agitation.

³² Franda, *Radical Politics*, 150.

³³ Amar Bhattacharya, *Revolution Unleashed: A History of Naxalbari Movement in India 1964 to 1972* (Calcutta: Sampark, 2007), 18.

³⁴ *Katha o Kalam* published by Sunil Tarafdar from Siliguri, *Pragati* from Nabadwip, *Koshti Pathar* from Ghola road, Calcutta, *Krantikal* from Ramanand Mazumdar Street Calcutta, *Lokayan* from Radhanath Mullick Lane, *Bingsha Shatabdi* from Grey Street, *Shalaka* from Benares Road (Howrah), *Somprakash* from Baruipur (24 Parganas), *Uttar Jug* from Nirmal Chandra Street Calcutta, *Abad* by Radical book club, *Anik* from Punascha Parishad (Murshidabad). Apart from these others in circulation were *Chinta*, *Kalpurnush* (1967), *Nandan* (1966), *Puber Hawa* (1966), *Purbadesh* (1966), *Red Flag* (1966), *Janasangram* (1964), *Ghatanaprabaha* (1966), *Beethi* (1967), *Commune*, *Chhatrafauz* (connected with the Presidency College Student Consolidation), *Santras*, and *Dakshin Desh*. See, Bhattacharya, *Revolution Unleashed*, 23; Partha N. Mukherji, "Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal", in *Social Movements in India: Studies in Peasant, Backward Classes, Sectarian, Tribal and Women's Movements*, ed. M.S.A Rao (New Delhi: Manohar, 2016), 25-26.

The Naxalbari area is strategically located in India's narrowest corridor (popularly referred to as the Chicken's Neck), 13-14 miles wide, connecting the rest of India to its northeast. It is bordered by Nepal, Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan), Sikkim, Tibet & China, Bhutan making it a sensitive zone for the government. Quite naturally the unrest that brewed up in this strategically sensitive zone from the 1950s, culminating in the events of 1967, became a cause of national concern complicated by international repercussions.

In addition to the special strategic nature, the nature of cultivation and society was also different, given the existence of tea plantations and large tribal population (Santals, Oraons, Rajbansis, Mundas and a small number of Terai Gurkhas). In the colonial period this was a non-regulation area outside the jurisdiction of the Government of Bengal. The tea plantations were mainly owned by the British companies and the tribal labourers were brought in from the Chota Nagpur region. In such a framework, existence of a long history of exploitation was natural. Beside the land planted with tea, the owners had under their possession lands which plantation workers or others cultivated to grow other crops on a group sharing basis. In many cases such lands were allowed as service tenures or *bakshish khets* for private use of workers as rewards for their services. Landless peasants in the area of the tea estates and particularly the tribals on many instances attempted to establish claims on the uncultivated lands of the plantations. Hence land disputes mainly on the issues of land grabbing, squatting and eviction were common. Existence of moneylenders and land speculators were additional problems. The land problem was complicated by the land reform legislations enacted in the 1950s. The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act which fixed a ceiling of 25 acres on agricultural holdings kept tea plantations out of its purview. The tribal custom of shifting cultivation with its process claiming and reclaiming lands was an additional complication. The States Reorganisation Act of 1956 complicated matters as it resulted in transfer of portions of Bihar to West Bengal like Islampur (currently in Uttar Dinajpur district), which made it necessary to adapt land reform laws of two states with its administrative difficulties. The Congress tried to lessen the impact of tea estate exclusion in 1954 by allowing the state to acquire some paddy land, or land used for rice cultivation, from tea garden management. However, tea estate management opposed this aspect of the Congress reforms throughout the 1950s and succeeded in reversing the legislation in 1964.³⁵

³⁵ Franda, *Radical Politics*, 153-154.

The tradition of resistance in the area goes back to the 1940s. The initial initiatives to organize the plantation workers into unions like the 'Bagracoat Cha-Garden Mazdoor Panchayet' in the Dooars area can be attributed to the Congress Socialist Party followed by Praja Socialist Party post-independence. Notable in this regard was the activism of leaders like Ghanashyam Mishra, Debaprasad Ray, Bhimbahadur Lama to name a few.³⁶ Thus it will be wrong to assume the Communist Party to be the first mobiliser in the area. For understanding the communist activists, we have to depend on Kanu Sanyal's account. Writing in 1973,³⁷ Sanyal states that attempts have been made to present the agitation in Naxalbari as a creation of events in 1967. He divides organisation activities in different phases. The beginning of organisation in the region dates back to 1946, which was interrupted by the insurrectionary line adopted by the Communist Party post-independence. The period from 1951-1954 was the organisation stage. In this period focus was placed on stopping illegal extortions by the jotedars. As tea gardens and villages were adjacent to each other and given solidarity along community lines, an alliance of tea garden workers and peasants came naturally. The second stage identified by Sanyal was from 1955 to 1957 which saw the development of united class struggle of the workers and peasants in the area. During the 1955 bonus struggle of the tea workers, thousands of tea workers and peasants armed with conventional weapons forced the planters and the police to retreat. The third stage was from 1958-1962, when the West Bengal Kisan Sabha gave a call to regain possession of the benami land. The sub-divisional Kisan Samiti in Naxalbari gave the call from its conference to confiscate the entire produce of jotedar's land. The call given out by the conference was to reap and store harvest in the cultivator's home itself and raising the red flag, compel jotedars to furnish proof of ownership before the peasant's committee without which no share could be claimed, protect crops by arming oneself and saving the crop from the police. Such was the intensity of struggle in 1958-1959 that two thousand peasants were arrested, seven hundred criminal cases were instituted, police failed to arrest any leading cadre and armed clashes both with the jotedar and police took place. The peasantry kept 80% crop in their possession and saved 70% from the hands of the police.³⁸ During the 1962-1964 stage, large numbers in the area were arrested for pro-China stance. 1966 also witnessed strikes in the tea plantations setting the climate for further agitations.

³⁶ For details see Minati Dutta Mishra, Gopal Laha, Poulomi Bhawal, eds., *Shaheed Ghanashyam Mishra: Smarok Grantha / Martyr Ghanashyam Mishra: Life and Legacy* (Kolkata: Anima Prakashani: 2019).

³⁷ Kanu Sanyal, "More about Naxalbari", in *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol.2, eds., Samar Sen, Debabrata Panda, Ashish Lahiri (Calcutta: Kathashilpa, 1978), 326-347. Written in April 1973, the article first appeared in *Proletarian Path*, II, nos. 4 & 5 (May-August 1974).

³⁸ Sanyal, "More about Naxalbari", 331-332.

The next landmark was the Siliguri Sub-divisional Peasant Convention held on March 18, 1967 but before moving further a quick glance at the leadership and peasant organisation is imperative. The Kisan Sabha organisation in the area comprised young leadership. A big part of the leadership originated locally. Kanu Sanyal, 35 years old when he became a popular organiser in the area, hailed from a wealthy family but had renounced all claims to family holdings and integrated himself with the peasants and agricultural workers resulting in widespread popularity. Apart from Sanyal there was a diverse group of young and frustrated peasant leaders who came from a variety of backgrounds. As Franda notes, the Krishak Samiti was a loose knit organisation with an inner core – the trio – Kanu Sanyal, Jangal Santhal and Khokan Mazumdar and an outer core of twelve leaders including Charu Mazumdar, Kamakshya Banerjee, Phani Das alias Phani master, Bansia Singh, Prahlad Singh, Moni Lal Singh, Shib Sharan Pahariya, Kadaum Malik, Mujibur Rahaman.³⁹ Women also played important roles in Samiti work. Shanti Munda, Lila Mazumdar, Barka Devi, Galeswari Tharu can be named among many others. Also, the Krishak Samiti over the years had developed autonomy in functioning from the state leadership and as well as the district committee.

The March 1967 Peasant Convention issued a call to establish the authority of peasant committees in tackling village matters, getting organised and armed and smash the jotedar's monopoly of land ownership by redistributing land through the peasant committees. In this Convention, the state unit of the CPI (M) was not represented indicating the difference in stance. The Convention had an enormous effect in the region. Kanu Sanyal in his *Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region*⁴⁰ states:

To put this call of the conference into effect the revolutionary peasants first of all laid stress upon the task of creating armed groups of peasants in the villages. In every village we heard the words: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." This is because every single struggle, however small, whether for stopping usury or on any other issue, has been invariably met with lathis and guns. This is why this call worked like magic in organising the peasants...

Almost all villages got organised during the period from the end of March to the end of April 1967. Whereas, previously, the membership strength of the Kisan Sabha could not be increased beyond 5000, the membership now jumped to 40,000. About 15 to 20 thousand peasants began to do whole -time work and build up peasant committees in villages. The young men of the villages who had never before been seen in the front ranks of the Kisan Sabha now occupied the place of veteran peasant cadres. With the speed of a storm the revolutionary peasants, in the course of about one and a half

³⁹ Franda, *Radical Politics*, 156.

⁴⁰ Kanu Sanyal, "Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region", in *The Historic Turning Point: A Liberation Anthology*, Vol.1, ed. Suniti Kumar Ghosh (Calcutta: 1992), 345-363. The original Bengali version appeared in the weekly *Deshabrati* in October 24, 1968 and in *Liberation*, II, no. 1 (November 1968).

months, formed peasant committees into armed village defence groups. In a word, they organised about 90 per cent of the village population...⁴¹

The peasant committees thus formed took a series of actions. They declared all land which was not owned but tilled by them were to be redistributed by the committees. All the legal deeds and documents relating to land that had been used to cheat them like receipts, plans, deeds etc were burned and interests on loan and mortgages to the moneylenders and jotedars cancelled. All hoarded rice which was the instrument of feudal exploitation were confiscated by the peasants and redistributed. Several oppressive jotedars who were hostile to peasant struggles, agents of the jotedars and those who cooperated with the police were subjected to open trials. Some were sentenced to death while in many cases they were paraded through the village streets with shoes strung around their necks so that social disgrace prevents them for venturing into such acts in future. The committees in anticipation of state repression armed themselves with bows, arrows, spears and even guns which they snatched from the jotedars. The committees even arranged for night watch in the villages and even ensured smooth running of schools.⁴²

Suniti Kumar Ghosh notes that the line adopted in Naxalbari was not to annihilate landlords physically. Open trials were held and only in notorious cases like that of Nagen Roychoudhuri, who had opened fire on the peasants injuring some of them, that death sentence was carried out.⁴³ In this context a difference in line between Kanu Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar can be noted. The main difference between the two lines appeared to be Mazumdar's emphasis on forming secret combat groups to set fire to jotedar's houses and attacking individual jotedars which fell out of favour with the Kanu Sanyal group. The points of agreement of the two lines were that the Chinese path was the path of India's liberation, revolution can be completed through armed struggle and the politics of agrarian revolution has to be propagated among the workers and peasants leading to the organisation of a secret party. On compromise, it was decided that the cadres of the Local Committee led by Sanyal would put their strategy in action in the Naxalbari area while the Charu Mazumdar line will be implemented in the Chater Hat-Islampur area in West Dinajpur district.⁴⁴ The action in the Chater-Hat area based on the six documents was reported to be a failure. As Sanyal notes,

⁴¹ Sanyal, "Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region", 349.

⁴² Sanyal, "Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region", 350-351.

⁴³ Suniti Kumar Ghosh, *Naxalbari Before and After*, 128.

⁴⁴ Ghosh, *Naxalbari Before and After*, 126-128.

Secret groups were formed, a little propaganda was made and actions were started. That is, efforts were made to set fire to jotedars' houses, some paddy were harvested at night and plans for snatching guns failed. As politics was not given importance, as the necessity of building mass organisation and mass movements was ignored, actions based on combat groups became the assembly place for some lumpen elements. During the Naxalbari uprising in 1967, the jotedars of this area mobilised the entire peasantry behind a certain political party and attacked the houses of the known combat group cadres... some leaders of the combat groups and party cadres, having no shelter in the face of jotedars' attack, were forced to leave the area...⁴⁵

A conference held in Buraganj in April-May 1967 had led to a compromise between two lines in terms of peasant mobilisation. All the eight documents were discussed in the presence of nearly 5000 peasants. The Charu-liners emphasised total appropriation of the lands, paddy, cattle and all other property of the big jotedars, disarming them, establishment of people's government through liberated zones and annihilation of class enemies through armed revolution. The Kanu-liners pointed out the need to solve the land problem before venturing into armed revolt. Once the illegally held land in the occupation of the jotedar was seized, the question of defending it would arise against the jotedar offensive. If such developments did not take place, they could engage in a legal offensive and armed confrontation would not be a necessity. The following decisions emerged from the conference which highlight the nature that the Naxalbari struggle displayed before the May incident – seize lands of jotedars (except those in which the jotedar is engaged in self-cultivation) and also that of the plantation workers who had purchased land from poor peasants, cultivate the seized lands, retain produce of the land appropriated from the jotedars but share half of the crop produced on the plantation worker's lands.⁴⁶

Noticing these activities at the local level the state leadership of the CPI(M) attempted to enter into discussions with the Kisan Sabha and Kanu Sanyal. Pramode Dasgupta and Harekrishna Konar is noted to have visited the area to discuss matters. One important factor has to be kept in mind in the backdrop of such discussions. The leadership of the Krishak Samiti as well as those of the state leadership assumed that the Congress would return to power in 1967 and accordingly decision to mobilise peasant agitation in the northern districts immediately after the elections were in place. When CPI (M) itself became a part of the government in 1967, complexities emerged and a great deal of tension developed between the state party leadership and the local Samiti over the issue of proposed agitation. On the one hand it was unable to

⁴⁵ Sanyal, "More about Naxalbari", 335-336.

⁴⁶ Partha N. Mukherji, "Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal", 44.

support the planned agitation while on the other hand it became impossible to prevent the local leadership, which was already functioning autonomously, from launching agitation of its own.

The stance of Harekrishna Konar (Land and Land Revenue Minister of the United Front government, member of the CPI (M) Central Committee and General Secretary of West Bengal Krishak Sabha) is important in this regard. Konar's report as General Secretary of the West Bengal Krishak Sabha in its conference held on October 14 -16, 1966 at Memari, Burdwan, which is less than one year before the Naxalbari incident is significant. He is noted to have emphatically stated that fundamental land reform cannot be carried out by amending the existing laws or by relying on the bureaucracy. To fulfil this objective, it was necessary to create a situation in which the legal deeds and documents of the landlords and the usurers would be useless and the toiling peasants would themselves decide who were the landlords and the usurers, how much land they possessed and location of such possessions. He stated,

It would be the toiling peasants who would take possession of the lands of the landlords and the usurers and distribute them... It can be achieved by passing through the fire of bitter class struggle. It can be clearly realised that this kind of fundamental land reforms cannot be carried out within the existing state, social and economic structure. Without doubt this is an inseparable part of the struggle of the entire people against imperialism and feudalism. The peasants can carry this struggle to victory by strengthening their alliance with the working class and other democratic sections of the people.⁴⁷

Again, in an article in the Bengali weekly organ *Deshhitaishree* (Autumn Festival Publication /*Sharod Shonhkya*, 1371 BS), Konar voiced the following viewpoint,

Land reforms in the interest of the peasantry cannot be carried out through amendments to the laws by the existing ruling classes or by relying on bureaucratic deeds and documents... Compared to ten years ago, the number of landless agricultural labourers and share croppers have increased significantly. The problem is so complex that there can be no basic remedy by amending the laws and with the help of the bureaucratic machinery which is intimately connected with the landlords and jotedars. The crisis has reached a stage when no partial reforms can prevent it from worsening. A radical surgical operation is necessary today. The legal deeds and documents of the landlords and jotedars have to be cancelled; no quarters should be given to them. It is for the toiling peasants in a village to meet and decide who are landlords, jotedars and usurers and to distribute the lands wherever and in whatever way they are under their possession.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Harekrishna Konar, "The Peasant's Problem and Struggle", The Secretary's Report to the 18th Conference of the Provincial Krishak Sabha (1966), 25 trans. from Bengali in Ghosh, *Naxalbari Before and After*, 130.

⁴⁸ Ghosh, *Naxalbari Before and After*, 131; Also see Harekrishna Konar, *Selected Works* (Calcutta: Printed by Pressman, 1977), 18-20.

Soon after swearing in office as the Land and Land Revenue minister, Konar announced a policy of quick distribution of surplus land among the landless and stopping of eviction of sharecroppers. In May 1967, in an interview with *Ganashakti* he stated that the government has decided to distribute land among the landless and poor peasants on the basis of consultations with the members of the gram panchayats, representatives of Kisan Sabhas, members of legislature and anchal pradhans. He also invited militant initiative from the people by stating that ‘development of peasant’s initiative and advance of organised force would pave the way for further progress.’⁴⁹

Konar did not realise that the escalating expectations after the formation of United Front ministry will be triggered to action by such statements, which in turn will spiral out of control. Changing his stance soon after, he advised peasants and their mass organisations to co-operate in a constructive way with the police and bureaucracy. In this context the meeting of Konar with Sanyal at Sukhna forest bungalow on May 17, 1967 is another important event. The event does not find mention in Sanyal’s writings. Arun Prosad Mukherjee, who was the then Superintendent of Police (SP), Darjeeling made references in his work regarding his meeting with Kanu Sanyal and Souren Bose on May 18, 1967. According to Mukherjee, Konar had arranged a meeting with Sanyal on May 17 and had asked Mukherjee to meet at the forest bungalow on May 18, 1967, where he met Sanyal and Souren Bose. Available sources state that in that meeting Sanyal had agreed that all unlawful activities would be suspended, the peasants would not take out armed possessions or organise meetings which had terrifying effects on the land owners and others, would not take the law into their own hands and refer the land disputes to the Block Development Officer or the Sub-Divisional Officer who would expeditiously deal with such cases. Sanyal was also reported to have agreed that there would be no resistance to arrest of persons and all persons wanted by the police including Sanyal himself and Jangal Santhal would surrender. The peasants would be asked to obey the orders promulgated by the administration to maintain law and order and not take recourse to any action that amounted to looting of foodgrains. Efforts at de-hoarding will be welcome if it was done with prior intimation to the police station and in the presence of a government officer.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sumanta Banerjee, “Naxalbari and the Left Movement”, in *Social Movements and the State*, ed. Ghyansham Shah (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), 126.

⁵⁰ Amiya K. Samanta, *Left Extremist Movement in West Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay Pvt. Ltd. 1984) 79; Arun Prosad Mukherjee, *Maoist ‘Spring Thunder’: The Naxalite Movement (1967-1972)* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 2007), 46-47.

Mukherjee noted that though Sanyal accepted all the proposals, there was no communication from the latter afterwards and it was learnt later that Mazumdar had criticised them for entertaining such revisionist ideas at the crucial stage of the struggle and strongly advised escalation of militant activities.⁵¹

The early stages of the movement from March to May 1967 was not radicalised and was similar to peasant movements organised in the past. Samiti members demonstrated in front of the properties of those landholders who had either engaged in benami transactions or offended members by evicting a peasant or by storing excessive amounts of grains. On occasions, these protests would end in the confiscation of food supplies that had been hoarded and a brawl between the protesters and the police, the landlord, or administrative officials, which would typically cause a few minor injuries. In some cases, members of the Samiti forced their way into uncultivated land or tea estates where they sought to take possession of the land either by ploughing, by felling trees or by just ‘sticking a red flag to the ground’.⁵² The movement assumed a completely different character after the incidents of May, 1967. The action of the police had been quite cautious till May because the new government at Calcutta had not provided clear instructions on how to react in cases of peasant agitation and land occupation. The United Front Ministry promised not to repress the democratic and lawful struggles of the people, as well as to acknowledge the right of workers and peasants to voice their just demands and grievances. Law enforcement officials had consistently taken decisive action against the forced occupation of land during the previous Congress administration but in case of the Front ministry ideological commitments of the Left was bound to bring ambiguity.

The first significant conflict between the peasantry and the State apparatus transpired on May 24, 1967, when confrontation of armed tribals with a police party, who went there to detain several wanted figures led to the death of a police officer named Sonam Wangdi. In retaliation, the police sent a force to Prasadjote in Naxalbari on May 25. A series of events culminated in opening fire which resulted in the death of nine people, including two children and six women. Any such incident is bound to have multiple narratives. Naxalbari was no exception. The rebel narrative can be gauged from the following account,

According to one adivasi leader Bighal Kishan, “Krishak Samiti (The Peasants’ Forum) called for seizing of land and paddy collection. I used to work on the land of local owner and Bangla Congress leader Ishwar Tirkey. On the call of the Forum,

⁵¹ Mukherjee, *Maoist ‘Spring Thunder’*, 97.

⁵² Franda, *Radical Politics*, 160.

I went with my plough to occupy the land. But men belonging to Ishwar Tirkey started beating me up on the Laharibura's land. My head was fractured. They took away my plough and bullock. In protest, Prahlad Singh, his wife Sonamoti Singh and Mujib along with others gheraoed Ishwar Tirkey's house". In response to the complaints on these incidents on 24 May Inspector Sonam Wangdi of Enforcement Dept. Naxalbari P.S., Officer S. Mukherjee, S.I Narayan Chowdhury and B. Bhattacharya with armed police went to Hatighisa Barajharu to arrest the peasant leaders. Police reports say that the administration believed that the militant farmers would give up without any fight or show gesture of non-cooperation according to an agreement between Harekrishna Konar and Kanu Sanyal... In reality the opposite happened. In Barajharu as soon as the police party entered, the shouts arose for local people which drew them from Buraganj, Ajamabad, Shibadillajot and Bijoyanagar Tea Gardens and about a 1000 of them came out and gheraoed the police. In the agitated situation an arrow shot by a youth stuck the chest of Inspector Wangdi. Immediately the others also started showering arrows. Sonam Wangdi, being pierced by three arrows in his lungs, died the next day in hospital.

Khokhan Mazumdar, a witness to the Naxalbari incident that day said- "The people in the area got agitated due to the fault of the police. Wangdi pushed aside the crowd and was approaching the front with other police officers. Possibly he wanted to talk with the peasant leaders. In the commotion, someone from the crowd shot an arrow. Immediately arrows started coming to the police..."⁵³

The police narrative can be gauged from the account of SP of Darjeeling, Arun Prosad Mukherjee,

On receipt of an information that some of the ring- leaders concerned in the series of lawless activities during the past few months are organising people in Barajharujote, P. S Naxalbari, to commit further mischief, O.C. Naxalbari P.S. (S.I. S N. Mukherjee) with one Inspector (S.A. P), three S.Is., 5 N.C.Os., 31 Consts. (Including 15 armed constables) and two Gas from Bijaynagar Camp came near Barajharujote for effecting the arrest of the wanted miscreants when they were confronted by a mob of about 300 persons armed with bows, arrows, spears, lathis etc. with the womenfolk forming the vanguard. Apprehending a serious clash, the OC sent a message through somebody to Naxalbari P.S. (at a distance of about 2 miles) for immediate re-inforcement. The reinforcement arrived shortly thereafter led by inspector Shri Sonam Wangdi with one S.I., one N.C.O and 9 Consts (lathis). On seeing this reinforcement, the male miscreants retreated to a distance leaving the womenfolk in the same place. Thereafter, Inspector Shri Wangdi with the O.C. and two sub inspectors (all unarmed) advanced towards the women folk and asked them to disperse... They however kept the main police party at a distance and out of site of the mob as also of themselves under the charge of S.A.P Inspector, thinking that their presence might provoke the mob into violence. As the officers along with Inspector Shri Wangdi were talking to the womenfolk, the menfolk suddenly rushed towards them and started shooting arrows. Inspector Shri Wangdi received three or four arrow shots and fell down unconscious. The O.C. Naxalbari P.S. also received two arrow shots and fell down. In the meantime, they were completely surrounded by the mob who started beating them up with the lathis..."⁵⁴

⁵³ Bhattacharya, *Revolution Unleashed*, 41.

⁵⁴ Mukherjee, *Maoist 'Spring Thunder'*, 49-50.

The incident of May 25 changed the nature of the movement altogether. According to one narrative, Prahlad Singh and his wife Sonamati had taken the initiative to call a meeting in Prasadjote on May 25. While the meeting was in progress, a patrol van of the police stopped at a distance, armed policemen dismounted, took position behind bushes and opened fire on the meeting killing 11 people including seven women and two children.⁵⁵ The official narrative presented a different version. The wireless message transmitted by the S.I, Darjeeling provided the following account,

On 25.5.67 morning one Police Party led by Inspector D.B Allay was confronted by a hostile crowd of about 1000 men and women armed with bows, arrows etc. when some of the wanted persons were sought to be arrested. On hearing this I took out one Police Party and the S.D.O., Siliguri to take out another party to confront the mob from two different directions... The party led by S.D.O. was confronted by the mobs from two directions, each mob consisting of about 300 men and women armed with bows, arrows, etc. In both cases women were kept in the front attack, a tactic which was adopted by the miscreants on 24.5.67 when the Police Officer including Inspector Shri Wangdi were severely attacked. S.D.O administered repeated warnings to the mobs.... These had no effect. On the contrary the mobs from both directions started advancing towards the Police Party and shooting arrows. S.D.O. then ordered firing of 5 warning shots which also did not deter the rioters. He then ordered firing of 5 rounds at the hostile mob. This too had very little effect. Another five rounds of firing were ordered. In the meantime, the mob from the other direction continued to press forward and eight rounds of firing towards this mob were ordered by him. At the stage the mobs started dispersing and no firing was resorted to thereafter...⁵⁶

Newspaper reports of May 25 and 26, 1967 carried short factual accounts of both the incidents. In any resistance clash of narratives are imperative and the actual truth may lie somewhere in the grey area between the two. The victory of one narrative over the other is determined by the prevailing socio-political-economic climate and the sentiments they sway. We have already noted the overall scenario in Bengal in this period and the image of Sonamoti Singh hit in her chest with a bullet, with her three-month-old baby tied to her back, was the ultimate spark that the climate needed to spiral out of control. The nature of rural countryside itself changed after this date having its repercussions across state borders. All sections of society were affected by this. Walls across cities were smeared with slogans in red, '*Tomar Bari, Amar Bari Naxalbari Naxalbari*' (Your Home, My Home, Naxalbari Naxalbari). The scattered criticisms against the CPI (M) found its coherence ushering in a new direction for India's communist movement leading to the birth of CPI (Marxist -Leninist).

⁵⁵ Bhattacharya, *Revolution Unleashed*, 42.

⁵⁶ Mukherjee, *Maoist 'Spring Thunder'*, 51.

Birth of the CPI (Marxist -Leninist) and the Naxal Ideology: An Overview

On June 12, 1967 the United Front government sent a six-member committee to make on spot investigation at Naxalbari which included Harekrishna Konar (CPI (M)), Bishwanath Mukherjee (CPI), Sushil Dhara (Bangla Congress), Amar Prasad Chakraborty (Forward Bloc), Nani Bhattacharya (RSP) and Deoprakash Rai (Gorkha League). The committee distributed a leaflet which said that possession of benami land or land beyond ceiling limits should follow administrative guidelines and mentioned formation of regional land development committees to look into such matters. It also warned that if disruptive activities did not end by 22nd June, administration would undertake necessary measures to quell the same from June 24 onwards. After the ministerial delegation returned to Calcutta, the CPI(M) State Committee dismissed on 20th June 1967, 19 members for flouting party discipline which included Sushital Roy Chowdhury, Parimal Dasgupta and few days later removed another 13 which included Saroj Dutta among other leaders and members.⁵⁷ The Darjeeling Regional Committee and the Siliguri Local Committee was also disbanded. On June 28, Sushital Roy Chowdhury, Saroj Dutta, Niranjan Basu and other members of the editorial board of newspaper *Deshhitoishi* were asked to vacate offices. After this they started publishing their newspaper *Deshabrati*, the first issue being published on July 6, 1967. The English mouthpiece *Liberation* and *Lokajuddha* in Hindi also started circulation subsequently. On July 5, the Chinese Communist Party's *People's Daily* published a long article titled "Spring Thunder Over India" and it was also broadcast by Peking radio. An excerpt can be quoted as follows,

A peal of spring thunder has crashed over the land of India. Revolutionary peasants in the Darjeeling area have risen in rebellion. Under the leadership of a revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party, a red area of rural revolutionary armed struggle has been established in India. This is a development of tremendous significance for the Indian peoples' revolutionary struggle.

In the past few months, the peasant masses in this area, led by the revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party have thrown off the shackles of modern revisionism and smashed the trammels that bound them. They have seized grain, land and weapons from the landlords and the plantation owners, punished the local tyrants and wicked gentry, and ambushed the reactionary troops and police that went to suppress them, thus demonstrating the enormous might of the peasant revolutionary struggle... The absolutely correct thing has been done by the revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party and they have done it well. The Chinese people joyfully applaud this revolutionary storm of the Indian peasants in the Darjeeling area so do all Marxist-Leninists and revolutionary people of the whole world...⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For detailed list of expelled members see Bhattacharya, *Revolution Unleashed*, 46-47.

⁵⁸ *People's Daily*, "Spring Thunder over India" in *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol 2, eds., Sen, Panda, Lahiri, 188-192. Originally published on July 5, 1967.

Amidst such developments, approval for police action on July 5, 1967 was given and the district police prepared a plan of action named Operation Crossbow. Intense police action which followed, led to the arrests of leaders like Jangal Santhal and others. Kanu Sanyal, Dipak Biswas, Kadam Mullick and Khokon Mazumdar fled to Peking where they reached in September 1967. In October, CPI(M) decided to expel all those opposing the party line like Nagi Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, Satyanarayan Singh in Bihar, Shivkumar Misra and K.B Ansari in Uttar Pradesh to name a few prominent ones. Members were also expelled in Orissa, Assam, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The dissidents formed the *Naxalbari -O- Krishak Sangram Sahayak Committee* (Naxalbari and Peasant Struggle Assistance Committee) led by Sushital Roy Chowdhury which called a meeting at Shahid Minar on November 11, 1967. The meeting was addressed by Charu Mazumdar. On November 13 the Committee called a convention at Calcutta and invited the expelled members of the various states. The Declaration of the Revolutionaries of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) of November 13, 1967 was adopted which laid down the main tasks as follows,

- (1) To develop and co-ordinate militant and revolutionary struggles at all levels, specially, peasant struggles of the Naxalbari type under the leadership of the working class;
- (2) To develop militant, revolutionary struggles of the working class and other toiling people to combat economism and to orient these struggles towards agrarian revolution;
- (3) To wage an uncompromising ideological struggle against revisionism and neo-revisionism and to popularize the thought of Comrade Mao Tse-tung, which is Marxism-Leninism of the present era, and to unite on this basis all revolutionary elements within and outside the party;
- (4) To undertake preparations of a revolutionary programme and tactical line based on concrete analysis of the Indian situation in the light of Comrade Mao Tse-tung's thought.⁵⁹

The Declaration also emphatically stated that the time has come to start building a 'really revolutionary party 'that would be the 'genuine Communist Party' in the country. This Convention led to the formation of All India Coordination Committee of Revolutionaries of CPI (M) – AICCCR of CPI(M). On May 14, 1968 near the anniversary of Naxalbari armed struggle the AICCCR of CPI (M) met in Calcutta and decided on changing the name of the committee to All India Communist Revolutionaries Coordination Committee (AICCCR). In this meeting a call was given to boycott the upcoming elections and organise and rally people

⁵⁹ "Declaration of the Revolutionaries of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)", in *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol 2, eds., Sen, Panda, Lahiri, 195-196.

‘along the path of revolutionary class struggles’ and build Naxalbari type movements to ‘march ahead along the path of the People’s Democratic Revolution.’⁶⁰ All the declarations and resolutions are a reflection of the vision of Charu Mazumdar who became the ideologue of Naxalism to be criticised and disputed later on by others. Writing in December 1968, Mazumdar notes,

Today, the revolutionary Marxist-Leninists cannot opt for the parliamentary road. This is true not only for the colonial and semi-colonial countries, but for the capitalist countries as well. In this new era of world revolution when victory has been achieved in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, it has become the main task of the Marxist -Leninists the world over to establish bases in the rural areas and to build up, on a firm foundation, the unity of workers, peasants and all other toiling people through armed struggle. So, the slogan ‘boycott elections’ and ‘establish rural bases and create areas of armed struggle,’ which the revolutionary Marxist-Leninists have advanced, remain valid for the entire era.⁶¹

The activities of the Communist revolutionaries under the guidance of the AICCCR expanded during 1968-69. The lull that set in after the defeat of the rebels in 1967 was broken when on 7 September 1968, Babulal Biswakarma was killed after a four-hour gun duel with the police. A jotedar was also executed in Kharibari. However, on October 31 Kanu Sanyal was arrested from Birsingjote ebbing the tide of activism in the Naxalbari area once again. AICCCR activities were noticeable in Srikakulam, Telengana, Mushahari in Bihar and Lakhimpur in Uttar Pradesh.

In the meanwhile, in February 1969, the United Front was voted back to office. One of the first actions of this government was the release of political prisoners like Kanu Sanyal, Jangal Santhal and other leaders of Naxalbari uprising. The reason may have been depiction of a generous gesture to curb the appeal of the Naxalite communism, which was on the rise especially among middle class youth. The AICCCR in its meeting on February 8, 1969 amidst the environment of elections declared its intent to form a party. The resolution adopted in this meeting while acknowledging the revolutions in Naxalbari, Srikakulam, Mushahari, Lakhimpur, Kerala, tribal revolts in Chota Nagpur and various movements in Northeast India, stated that struggles cannot develop to a higher stage just on local initiatives. Only a

⁶⁰ AICCCR, “Resolution on Elections”, in *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol 2, eds. Sen, Panda, Lahiri, 201-203. This statement on elections was issued on May 14, 1968.

⁶¹ Charu Mazumdar, “Boycott Elections!” International Significance of the Slogan”, in *The Historic Turning-Point*, Vol I, ed. Ghosh, 114. First appeared in *Liberation*, II, no.2 (December 1968).

revolutionary party can infuse 'revolutionary discipline', 'spirit of self-sacrifice' and 'death-defying abandon'.⁶²

Such declarations of AICCCR follow directly from the ideology propounded by Charu Mazumdar whose influence was instrumental in framing the political resolution, party organisation and strategy of a new party. Regarding the need for a revolutionary party, Mazumdar wrote,

Chairman Mao has taught us that to make revolution we must have a revolutionary party, a party that is based on the revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism and reared in the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist style of work. Without such a party it is impossible to lead the proletariat and the broad masses of the people in this struggle against imperialism and its lackeys...

...such a revolutionary party will not be party to fight election campaigns, nor will it be based in the cities. A revolutionary party can never be an open party, nor can its main concern be to publish papers etc., nor can it depend on revolutionary intellectuals. The revolutionary party must depend on the workers and the land poor and landless peasants. Peasant struggles and secret organisations must be built up with the villages as their bases...

...let the revolutionary intellectuals come forward and help build the revolutionary party by spreading and propagating the thought of Chairman Mao among the workers and peasants.⁶³

However, the decision to form a party generated mixed reactions within the AICCCR itself. Many felt that the time was not yet ripe for the taking of such a step. There were differences in analysing the Indian situation as well. For instance, while Charu Mazumdar held that the main contradiction was between feudalism and the peasantry, Nagi Reddy of the Andhra group stressed the contradiction between the Indian people on the one hand and "American imperialism. British imperialism and neo-colonialism of Soviet revisionism" on the other.⁶⁴ The main difference was regarding the tactics to be followed. Nagi Reddy and his followers were in favour of a combination of legal and extra-legal struggles and believed in prolonged preparation mainly through economic struggles before launching a full-scale armed movement. The Srikakulam communists were in favour of immediate armed struggle. The Andhra Pradesh State Coordination Committee headed by Nagi Reddy concentrating in the Telengana region

⁶² AICCCR, 'It is Time to Form the Party', (February 8, 1969) in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. 1, ed. Ghosh, 40-43. Adopted on February 8, 1969 and published in *Liberation*, II, No.5 (March 1969).

⁶³ Charu Mazumdar, 'Undertake the Work of Building a Revolutionary Party', in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. 1, ed. Ghosh, 102-106. Published in, *Liberation*, I, no. 12 (October 1968).

⁶⁴ The difference in approach is clearly visible in the Resolution titled "Immediate Programme" adopted by the Andhra Pradesh Revolutionary Communist Committee in its Convention held on April 10-12, 1969. For full resolution see Sen, Panda, Lahiri, eds., *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol II, 233-250

got itself affiliated to the AICCCR in October 1968 but relations between Nagi Reddy group on one hand and AICCCR and Srikakulam District Coordination Committee deteriorated resulting in the former parting ways with the AICCCR. The AICCCR 'Resolution on the Andhra State Coordination Committee' stated,

AICCCR thinks that with this political difference all along the line, that is , difference regarding loyalty to the CPC, difference regarding people's armed struggle, and difference regarding boycotting elections, AICCCR and the Andhra Committee cannot and should not continue in the same Co-ordination... ⁶⁵

Even those who were in favour of forming a party did not agree with Charu Mazumdar totally. Satyanarain Singh of the Bihar State Coordination Committee revealed later at a meeting of the AICCCR in February 1969, that a controversy had broken out over the characterisation of the Indian bourgeoisie. While Charu Mazumdar was in favour of dismissing the entire bourgeoisie as comprador, Satyanarain Singh and a few others were eager to discover a section of the national bourgeoisie among them. Singh further claimed that while Charu Mazumdar and the West Bengal Committee described the main contradiction in India as one between the zamindars and the peasantry, the Bihar revolutionaries were in favour of describing it as between feudalism and the masses.⁶⁶ All these differences will assume escalated dimensions in the future leading multiple splits within the party but for the time being apart from few, majority agreed on the need to form a new party outside CPI(M).

The State Coordination Committee⁶⁷ of the AICCCR met from April 19-22, 1969 and formed a new party. The AICCCR issued a communique on April 22, 1969 announcing the formation of the party in the following words,

The All -India Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries, which met in a plenary session from 19th to 22nd April 1969, announces the formation of the revolutionary party, Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), based on the Thought of Mao Tse-tung on 22nd April, 1969, the one-hundredth birthday of Great Lenin- a task it set itself eighteen months ago , in November 1967- and also announces its own dissolution after setting up a Central Organising Committee to hold Congress at an appropriate time.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ AICCCR, "Resolution on the Andhra State Coordination Committee", in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. I, ed. Ghosh, 44. Published in *Liberation*, II, no.5 (March 1969).

⁶⁶ Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution*, 130.

⁶⁷ The State Coordination Committee members were Sushital Roy Chowdhury, Parimal Dasgupta, Suniti Kumar Ghosh, Asit Sen, Souren Basu, Kanu Sanyal, Shyamal Nandy, Kali Prasad Roy Chowdhury, Saibal Mitra, Dilip Pyne.

⁶⁸ AICCCR, "Communique of the All-India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries", in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. 1, ed. Ghosh, 45. Published in *Liberation*, II, no 7 (May 1969).

The ‘Political Resolution’⁶⁹ adopted on the same date provided an analysis of the situation and laid down the tasks before the party. The Resolution dubbed Indian society as being ‘semi-feudal ‘and semi-colonial’. Taking note of the increasing tide of peasant struggles in different parts of the country, the Resolution expressly stated the ‘principal contradiction’ to be ‘between feudalism and the masses of our peasantry’ and the current stage of Indian revolution is the ‘People’s Democratic Revolution’, the main content of which is ‘agrarian revolution’ to abolish ‘feudalism in the countryside’. As regards tasks, the Party’s main responsibility was chalked out as ‘organising the peasantry and advancing towards seizure of power through armed struggle’, the chief tactic being that of guerrilla warfare.

The meeting also adopted a resolution on the organisation of the new party.⁷⁰ The Party was defined as ‘the Party of armed revolution’. The path of armed revolution in a semi- colonial and semi-feudal backdrop, was primarily designated as a ‘peasant’s war’ against feudalism. Hence the task of the Party was to arouse the peasant masses in the countryside to wage guerrilla war, unfold agrarian revolution, build rural base areas, use the countryside to encircle the cities and capture the cities and liberate the whole country. The Party was to be a ‘rural based party’ and the chief work had to be in the villages. Such a Party was not to be a legal party with the main cadres remaining underground. The Resolution clearly laid down the requirement of cadres for such leading teams like they should be willing to leave the cities and go to the rural areas ‘to organise red bases of agrarian revolution’. Only professional revolutionaries who were ready to give up all interests apart from revolution must organise the leading teams. Such a Party should be a mass party in the sense of its link with the cause of the masses, in terms of quality rather than quantity. Democratic centralism was to be the organising principle i.e. maximizing democratic functioning under centralized guidance. The Party was publicly proclaimed at the May Day rally, 1969 at Shahid Minar, Calcutta.

No discussion on Naxal ideology is complete without reference to the *Historic Eight Documents* penned by Charu Mazumdar and circulated between 1965 and 1967. It must be noted that all these ideas regarding formation of revolutionary secret party, armed peasant struggle, area wise seizure of power, snatching of guns and arms, annihilation of repressive forces of state were formulated by him before Naxalbari uprising happened in May, 1967. The

⁶⁹ CPI (M-L), “Political Resolution of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)”, in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. 1, ed. Ghosh, 46-54. Published in *Liberation*, Vol. II, no 7, (May 1969).

⁷⁰ CPI (M-L), “Resolution on Party Organisation”, in *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol II, eds. Sen, Panda, Lahiri, 263-274. Adopted on April 22, 1969.

formation of AICCCR and various resolutions adopted which culminated in the formation of CPI (M-L) bear imprint of these ideas. The actions of the youth, the various flashpoints of struggle from 1969 onwards reflect the line and mode of action espoused by Mazumdar.

The nature of organisation of a revolutionary party was spelled out by him in the first document titled *Our Tasks in the Present Situation* dated January 28, 1965. The main basis of a revolutionary party was the revolutionary cadre – one who could analyse a situation according to his own initiative and act accordingly. The organisation suggested by him was as follows,

- Every party member must form at least one activist group of five and the member should train this group in political education (ideas and programme of agrarian revolution, class division of peasantry etc).
- Every party member must see that this group is safe from police target.
- A secret place of meeting of this activist group is a necessity and shelters for keeping one or two persons have to be arranged in underground if necessary.
- Every activist group will have definite persons as point of contact.
- There should be a secret place for documents.
- An activist group member will become a member of the party when political education is complete and after he becomes a party member the activist group will maintain no direct contacts with him.⁷¹

In the second document titled *Make the People's Democratic Revolution Successful by Fighting Revisionism* (1965), Mazumdar while analysing the experience of the Tebhaga movement stated that the primary reason why the movement, despite its scale failed to seize power, was its dependence on central leadership for supply of arms. The unarmed peasants were unable to face the arms of the ruling class because weapons were not collected locally and power not seized area wise. He further stated,

The lesson that has to be drawn from the mistakes of those days is that the responsibility of collecting arms lies with the local organisation, not with the center. So, the question of collecting arms will have to be put up before every Activist Group from now on. 'Dao,' knives, sticks—all these are weapons, and with their help at opportune moments, firearms will have to be snatched.⁷²

⁷¹ Charu Mazumdar, "Our Tasks in the Present Situation", in *Charu Mazumdar, Collected Works*, Vol. I, ed. Basu Acharya (Kolkata: Radical Impression, 2012), 18-19. Charu Mazumdar's Documents are also available online at <https://archive.org/details/charu-mazumdar-historic-eight-documents> ; Bengali version can be accessed from *Charu Mazumdar Rachanasangraha* (Kolkata: New Horizon Book Trust, 2001).

⁷² Charu Mazumdar, "Make the People's Democratic Revolution Successful by Fighting Revisionism", in *Charu Mazumdar: Collected Works*, Vol. I, 23-24.

Apart from snatching firearms, the party has to make efforts to recruit new cadres and on forming countless activist groups and all such member must be habituated with illegal work and activities like attaching illegal posters etc. The walls of urban and rural Bengal during this time bear testimony to the influence Mazumdar had on young minds.

In the third document titled *What is the Source of the Spontaneous Revolutionary Outburst in India*, dated April 9, 1965, Mazumdar again called out for an ‘area-wise seizure of power’ in the following words,

Come, Comrades, let all toiling people unitedly prepare for armed struggle against this government under the leadership of the working class, on the basis of the programme of agrarian revolution. On the other hand, let us lay the foundation of the New People’s Democratic India by building liberated peasant areas through peasant revolts.

Let us together, shoulder-to-shoulder, roar:

Long live the unity of the workers, peasants and the toiling masses!

Long live the imminent armed struggle of India!⁷³

Mazumdar provided his class analysis in the fourth document titled *Carry on the Struggle against Modern Revisionism* (1965). He noted that there were four classes among the peasants – rich, middle, poor and landless and apart from them the rural artisan class. The revolutionary consciousness of all classes differs and the Marxists must always try to establish the leadership of the poor and landless peasants, as this could ensure militancy in the peasant movement. No movement on the basic demands of the peasantry could be peaceful and their problems could not be solved with the help of any law issued by the government. The open peasant associations have the task of organising movements for ensuring legal benefits but the main task must be educating the peasantry in the tactic of agrarian revolution through area-wise seizure of power. Active resistance against repression was necessary for success, according to Mazumdar. By active resistance he meant,

- Preservation of cadres, proper shelter and communication
- Teaching common people, the technique of resistance like lying down during firings, taking help of strong barriers, forming barricades etc
- Make efforts to avenge every attack i.e., the “Tit for tat struggle” with the help of active cadres.⁷⁴

⁷³ Charu Mazumdar, “What is the Source of the Spontaneous Revolutionary Outburst in India”, in *Charu Mazumdar, Collected Works*, Vol. I, 31.

⁷⁴ Charu Mazumdar, “Carry on the Struggle against Modern Revisionism”, in *Charu Mazumdar: Collected Works*, Vol. I, 36-37.

In this document he also talks about the formation, propagation and maintenance of a secret party with cadres and activist groups building mass links.

Writing in the context of 1965, Mazumdar noted that the government had been resisting every movement by violent attacks and hence armed resistance movement was the only alternative. Without taking up arms and forming armed units for confrontation, any call to unarmed masses for resistance amounts to pushing them to death. In this fifth document titled, *What Possibility the Year 1965 is Indicating?* the call for annihilation of repressive forces of the state makes its first appearance,

The agitated masses today attack railway stations, police stations, etc. Innumerable agitations are bursting forth upon government buildings, or on buses, trams and trains. This is like that Luddites' agitation against machines. Revolutionaries will have to give conscious leadership. The people should be taught that repression is unleashed by police stations, but by the officer- in- charge; attacks are not directed by government buildings or by transport vehicles, but by the members of the government's repressive machinery; and against these men that our attacks are to be directed. So, attack the hated bureaucrats, attack police employees, attack military officers. *The working class and the revolutionary masses must be taught that they should not attack merely for the sake of attacking, but should finish the person whom they attack.* For, if they attack only, the reactionary machinery will take revenge. But if they annihilate, every one of the government's repressive machinery will get panic-stricken... ⁷⁵ (*italics for emphasis*)

After this document, Charu Mazumdar was arrested under the Defence of India Rules. The sixth document dated December 8, 1966 reiterated the need to build a true revolutionary party.⁷⁶ In the period of build up to the elections, the seventh document titled 'Build Armed Partisan Struggle by Fighting against Revisionism' called for taking full advantage of the pre -election environment, when discontented people are most receptive to propaganda. The last document (eighth) was written in April 1967 after the formation of the United Front government in West Bengal and circulated before the Naxalbari uprising. In this document Mazumdar openly criticised Harekrishna Konar's policy regarding land redistribution. He made a very interesting observation as quoted below,

Land reform in the peasant's interest is possible only when we are able to put an end to the sway of feudal classes over the rural areas. To do this, we shall have to seize land from the feudal classes and distribute it among the landless and poor peasants. We shall never be able to do this if our movement is confined to the limits of

⁷⁵ Charu Mazumdar, 'What Possibility the Year 1965 is Indicating?', in *Charu Mazumdar, Collected Works*, Vol I, 40.

⁷⁶ The sixth document is titled *The Main Task Today is the Struggle to Build Up the True Revolutionary Party through Uncompromising Struggle against Revisionism*.

economism. In every area where there has been a movement for vested land it is our experience that the peasant who has got possession of vested land and secured the license is no longer active in the peasant movement. What is the reason? It is because the poor peasant's class has changed within a year—he has turned into a middle peasant. So, the economic demands of poor and landless peasants are no more his demands. Therefore, economism causes a breach in the unity of fighting peasants and makes the landless and poor peasants frustrated. Advocates of economism judge every movement by the quantity of paddy in maunds or of land in bighas that the peasant gets. Whether the peasant's fighting consciousness has increased or not, is never their yardstick...⁷⁷

He notes that peasant struggles in the past have resulted in imposition of compromise from above by leaders, which was not a long-term solution. Arming peasantry and formation of liberated zones was the necessity. On the question of where will the peasants acquire guns from, Mazumdar notes that the peasant militants will have to be trained to snatch guns from class enemies and for doing so use various techniques including setting their houses on fire and also get guns by sudden attacks on armed forces of the government.

The formation of CPI (M-L) and the impact of Charu Mazumdar's ideas resulted in resurgence of radical Naxalite activities in different parts of West Bengal like Debra and Gopiballavpur in Midnapore, Birbhum, South 24 Parganas, areas of Burdwan and Hooghly. Streets of Calcutta and its suburbs saw intense activism. Apart from West Bengal other states which reported activism were Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Assam, Tripura, Kerala. As far as the fanning out of the movement in Bengal is concerned, the primary driving force were the students and youth who became the main mobilisers across districts.

‘Occupy College Street’⁷⁸, Presidency Consolidation and the Appeal of Charu Mazumdar to the Youth

One important feature of agitations in post-colonial setting was the involvement and enthusiasm of the youth which achieved a special dimension during the turbulent 1960s. The expression of social consciousness among the students in Bengal can be traced to the first half of the nineteenth century, when establishment of colleges in British India facilitated exposure

⁷⁷ Charu Mazumdar, “Carry Forward the Peasant Struggle by Thoroughly Combating Revisionism, Struggle Against Economism, Develop the Mass Movement”, in *Charu Mazumdar, Collected Works*, Vol. I, 55.

⁷⁸ The phrase ‘Occupy College Street’ has been adopted from Ranabir Samaddar, “Occupy College Street: Notes from the Sixties”, accessed, January 10, 2024,

http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_PML/RLS_PM/RLS_PM_Full_Papers/Ranabir.pdf & Ranbir Samaddar, “Occupy College Street: Student Radicalism in Kolkata in the Sixties”, *Slavic Review* 77, no.4 (2018), 904-911, <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2018.288>

to modern literature and sciences resulting in the genesis of rational and progressive thought. In 1828 the Academic Association was founded in Hindu College (later Presidency College and currently Presidency University) under Derozio. Throughout this century they formed an active part of several nationalist societies like Deshohitoishi Sabha of 1841, the Bengal British India Society of 1843, the Bharat Sabha, and the Samadarshi group of the Brahmo Samaj. 1875 saw the birth of Indian Association under Anandamohan Basu and Surendranath Bandopadhyay, the arrest of the latter leading to the first student strike in the history of student movement. Twentieth century saw student participation not only in mass movements but also in the extremist organisations. The first unified student organisation in this century was the All-Bengal Students Association in 1928 with programmes like establishing night schools for the workers, collecting information about the real state of the nation's farmers and bringing out a magazine named *Chhatra* (Student) to be the official organ of the organisation. The Association fizzled out in the 1930s.

1936 was a landmark year in student organisation when the All-India Students Federation (AISF) was formed in Lucknow at the All-India Students Convention. The Bengal delegates formed Bengal Provincial Students Federation (BPSF). Though formed under the aegis of Congress, the Federation over time came to be dominated by the CPI, like all the other mass front organisations. The students played a role not just in anti-British agitations but also in relief works like the famine of 1943 and also in movements like the Tebhaga.

With independence, the backdrop of student politics was transformed. In the 1950s, the central leadership of the Congress attempted to depoliticise the students by trying to form a National Union of Students but it failed. The students and youth remained active in localities in the form of clubs, social service organisations and engaged in organising sports, cultural programmes, relief work among the slum dwellers, organisation of night schools, polio camps and doing a plethora of work ranging from arrangement of funds for family contingencies to cremation rituals. This networking actually had a very important role to play during the turbulent decades of the 1950s and 1960s. It must be noted in this context that the Student Federation also had its internal divisions like the main Communist Party itself, that became visible in the context of the Sino-India war. The CPI took the Congress line and designated China as the aggressor and called upon the students, workers and peasants to support the stand and the Student Federation at that time owing allegiance to the CPI issued similar directives, which did not find acceptance among the general members and a rebel group was formed within. The Bengal Provincial

Student Federation was divided into the radicals and reformists i.e. Left and Right factions. The mouthpiece of the radical front of the Student Federation was *Chhatrafauj* and for the reformist wing it was *Chhatrasangram*.⁷⁹ The reformists were in majority among the provincial leadership, but the radicals were becoming increasingly popular among the members and leaders of the district committee. The leadership of the radicals stemmed from the grassroots and their relationship with the general students were quite cordial.⁸⁰ The increasing strength of the radical wing can be traced mainly from the food movement which saw the entry of fresh activists.

All the agitations in the turbulent decades in Bengal after independence like refugee movement, tram movement, teachers' movement saw youth participation but radical orientation towards armed struggle is noticeable from the food movement. The movements in this period were noted to be different in nature from the earlier ones. As Ashim Chatterjee notes, in all earlier agitations the youth participated under the influence and inspiration of the older, experienced leaders but the youth of the 1960s disregarded all such authority and guardianship of the seniors and acted upon their own interpretations and analysis. It is this autonomy of action of the young mind that distinguishes the movements of the 1960s from their predecessors.⁸¹ This totally had to do with the overall situation of the country after independence. Independence had brought in a sense of hope and jubilation for change and a better life. As the decades progressed, all such dreams were shattered. The prospect of education was overall bleak. In the absence of suitable employment opportunities, degrees and diplomas were becoming a meaningless pursuit. The number of applications from educated unemployed in the live registers of employment exchanges in India increased from 163000 in 1953 to 917000 by the end of 1966. This figure only shows the registered names. The actual position was far worse.⁸² Nawab Ali Yavar Jung, Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, in his interview to *The Statesman* noted that the causes and remedies of the student unrest in this period were located outside campuses and were part of the general malaise from which most citizens of the country were suffering due to increasingly difficult economic situation. He voiced against 'wild judgements' being passed on student community for disorders. In his opinion, lack of employment opportunities and uncertainty of the future were the main sources of problem for the educated

⁷⁹ Bhattacharya, *Revolution Unleashed*, 40.

⁸⁰ Saibal Mitra, "Shhat Doshoker Chhatro Andolan: Paschimbanga", in *Sattar Dashak : Shhat- Sattarer Chhatro Andolan/ The Student Movement in Bengal during 60s and 70s*, ed., Anil Acharya (Kolkata: Anushtup, 2020), 62.

⁸¹ Ashim Chattopadhyay, "Shhat-Sattarer Yuba-Chhatro Andolan", in *Sattar Dashak*, 16.

⁸² Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution*, 50.

ones and little promise was being held out by the system for engendering faith among them.⁸³ Given such trends, disillusionment and anti-establishment attitude was quite normal. This was compounded by the shattering of expectations across social strata from the poor peasant to the middle class, finally reaching its peak with the food movement.

Marcus Franda conducted an interesting study on college graduates to gauge perceived image towards political authority in 1963-1964. Out of a random sample of 200 graduates across 20 colleges⁸⁴, 104 were chosen for the final survey. Questions asked to respondents were regarding what constitutes political authority as per their perception, characteristics that would adequately describe them, relationships that exist among them, between them and other members of the political system and limitations presently imposed on them.⁸⁵ Majority of the respondents identified political authority with Congress and its leaders. 'People' as an answer or 'elected representatives' as an answer had minimum responses.⁸⁶ Regarding characteristics of political authority answer categories were personal integrity, public performance, responsive character, amount of learning possessed and highest responses noticed was in the category of 'men lacking integrity' & 'weak incompetent, uncertain performance of authorities.'⁸⁷ An interesting observation can be noted regarding mode of organisation of political authority. While many mentioned general elections as the means presently used, a large number did not consider elections to be crucial to the attainment of power. 55 respondents argued that while the general elections were presently used by those in authority to gain power, the same authorities could have secured these positions, even without the institution of electoral democracy. Respondents who identified the Prime Minister or other leading Congressmen as political authorities were inclined to argue that these men were not dependent on general elections and were in current positions due to financial, organisational control, status, stature or perhaps political acumen. Regarding images of policy making, lack of interest in the way

⁸³ "Students' Unrest Only Part of Countrywide Discontent- Nawab Ali Yavar Jung", *The Statesman*, December 22, 1966, 5.

⁸⁴ Names of colleges (non-technical) included in the survey were: Ashutosh College, Bangabasi College, Brahmananda Keshab Chandra College, Burdwan Raj College (Burdwan), City College, Andrews College (Howrah), Maulana Azad College, Maharaja Manindra Chandra College, Narasimha Dutt College, St. Pauls College, St Xaviers College, Scottish Church College, Surendranath College, Vidyasagar College, Rishi Bankim College, Presidency College.

⁸⁵ Marcus F. Franda, *Political Development and Political Decay in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K. L Mukhopadhyay, 1971), 108.

⁸⁶ Franda, *Political Development*, 112.

⁸⁷ Franda, *Political Development*, 124.

the system works is evident.⁸⁸ Regarding limitations or restraints on authority, 65 of the respondents noted lack of constitutional or governmental restraints and those who identified restraints referred to elections, people themselves like threat of demonstrations or discontent, press, and some referred to the Parliament. Regarding overall orientation towards authority, the responses become interesting. The highest responses registered was in the category of ‘unsatisfactory elite dominance’ where the dominant opinion was that the authority constituted by a small number of former nationalists who lacked personal virtue or virtue necessary for satisfactory performance in exercising authority, were weak and unable to cope with problems. The second highest response was in the category of ‘unsatisfactory electoral democracy’ where authority though elected were seen as either corrupt or lacked education. Smallest number of respondents identified ‘satisfactory elite dominance’. Only the employed section and those who felt closer to family or spent most leisure time with family of the sample – both technical and non -technical fields- displayed the last viewpoint.⁸⁹ The majority of respondents belonging to ‘unsatisfactory elite dominance’ category were unemployed and stayed away from family. The answers to all these categories of questions hint at the orientation of the youth towards the entire scenario. We can see the youth already becoming critical of authority in 1963-1964 in the elite institutions and circumstances 1965 onwards were bound to radicalize the responses further. The transition of Presidency College and other government as well as private institutions from elite, politically apathetic centres to the cauldron of resistances are a response to such circumstances.

Any discussions on youth hinges on the idea of youth mentality. Ashim Chatterjee notes, there is a saying that one who is not a revolutionary at 20 years of age has no heart and one who is a revolutionary even at 40 has no wisdom. At the young age the mind is quite open and free and family obligations have not yet set in. The young mind is quite emphatic and its perceptions of social ethics and images of perfect society are steeped in idealism. Such mind does not believe in the idea of compromise and any deviations from the path of idealist principles amounts to revisionism. Given this mentality and maturity level, responsibility in actions and judging an action by possible results is not expected. For the impatient mind, organised actions appeal less and spontaneity, fearlessness and sense of sacrifice to the extent of self-annihilation becomes the defining essence.⁹⁰ Young students give less importance to institutional- rule based politics

⁸⁸ Franda, *Political Development*, 130-132.

⁸⁹ Franda, *Political Development*, 138-139, 143-144.

⁹⁰ Chattopadhyay, “Shhat-Sattarer Yuba-Chhatro Andolan”, in *Sattar Dashak*, 16-17.

and even though they do not always have any definite plan and direction for social change, they are ready to take up any method that fulfilled their vision of a better society.

The activism of the 1960s was not just specific to India. This was a world trend in this period. Student agitations were being witnessed in Germany, France, America, Italy, Spain, Belgium to name a few. The biggest stir was caused by the Vietnam War and the Cultural Revolution in China. Naxalbari therefore added a new dimension and vigour to the already existing base of student activism in Bengal. The nature of the May incident was a trigger enough even for an apathetic mind. This accompanied by the prevailing socio-economic conditions, made the young mind susceptible to passionate appeals for struggle. Many consider Charu Mazumdar to be the architect of youth actions but in reality, the fact was the Mazumdar was successful in cultivating this inherent passionate mentality of the youth and their aspirations, thereby attracting them to his line of radical action.

The main centre of student agitation in Calcutta during this decade was the College Street area with Presidency College as its pivot. The political orientation of students towards radicalisation in the urban streets of Calcutta which later on spilled over to the districts began apparently over an insignificant incident in the college. The transformation of the College from an elite institution aloof from the politics of the day to becoming the hub of student politics is quite interesting. The College was a prestigious elite institute where admission was restricted to the best and bright students of Bengal, for whom administrative service was a prominent career choice. It was patronised by the elite of Bengali society like senior government officials, industrialists and business executives who sent their children to this college. Hence the atmosphere of the college was academics and career oriented.

Dipanjana Roy Chowdhury, one of the leaders of the Presidency agitation in his account, states that when he joined the College in 1961, the mentality of the students was limited to academics, personal life and high ambitions. Between 1961 and 1963, the only event that caused stir to some extent inside the College was the Sino-India war. Activism however was limited to a procession to the Chinese Consular office in Calcutta. Union elections existed but the excitement surrounding the union election was a temporary affair. Affinity towards Leftist ideology existed among a few students who identified themselves as supporters of the Student Federation. He notes that those who became prominent faces of Left movement like Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Ashim Chatterjee, Ashim Dasgupta where themselves involved more in deliberations on literature and poetry rather than active politics. Debates on communism did

happen but there was no militant activism that was witnessed in the years to come. There was no institutional shape to the Student Federation unit in the college. Neither Communist Party or Student Federation leaders had any direct communication with these students in the college. In 1963, the union in the college was in the hands of Presidency College Students' Organisation (PCSO) which claimed to be non-political but had pro-government tendencies. In 1964 the union was split between two groups – PCSO and Student Federation, even though elections were conducted on a non-party basis and in 1965 it passed to Student Federation (Left). However, party lines and open politics was not common given the general atmosphere of Presidency, where being associated with any political party and especially the Student Federation at that time was viewed with scepticism because it was felt that association with such organisation would affect academics and career prospects.⁹¹

This apathy was shattered by the food movement of 1965 and 1966. On one hand the patience of the people had crossed their threshold and on the other the attitude of the Congress ministers like Prafulla Sen, police atrocities in Basirhat, Swarupnagar, Krishnanagar, death of young students like Nurul Islam, Manindra Biswas created enough stir.⁹² In this context few students came forward to set up a formal unit of Student Federation in the college and in the forefront of this initiative was Ashim Chatterjee who became popular as Kaka in the college circle and will later on play a very important role in the Midnapore uprising during this period.

In October 1966 students of the college boarding in the adjoining Hindu Hostel⁹³ exploded over years of accumulated grievance and demanded the resignation of the hostel Superintendent whom they held responsible for their condition. The series of events that culminated in the commencement of a student agitation can be summarised as follows,⁹⁴

⁹¹ Dipanjan Roy Chowdhury, "Chhatro Andolan o Presidency College", *Sattar Dashak*, 132-133.

⁹² "Students Riot in Calcutta: 1 killed in Firing at Krishnagar", *The Statesman*, March 1, 1966, 1; "Army called out in Nadia: Calcutta Quiet After Day of Violence", *The Statesman*, March 6, 1966, 1; "Rs.17-Lakh Damage to Railway Property", *The Statesman*, March 9, 1966, 1; "Army called out in W. Bengal: Trains and Stations Burnt Down, Tracks Removed, 13 Killed in Firing, Curfew Clamped", *The Statesman*, March 11, 1966, 1.

⁹³ Eden Hindu Hostel is a heritage student hostel with a rich history. Presidency College was established in 1817 but it did not have a hostel then. Upon repeated demands and submission of petition to the then Lieutenant Governor Sir Ashley Eden, the decision to establish a hostel was made. The hotel became fully operational in 1887-1888. It was initially run by a Trustee Board and the government assumed full control of hostel administration in 1897. Initially the hostel was open to students of Presidency College but it opened to students of other government colleges like Goenka and Maulana Azad as well.

⁹⁴ Newspaper articles of the period like those in *The Statesman*, *Anandabazar Patrika* bear testimony of the agitation and the resultant situation generated by the movement. From August 1966 onwards, reports and images of Presidency College agitation and College Street regularly made it way to the cover pages and editorials.

August 30, 1966: 250 boarders of Hindu Hostel gheraoed the superintendent, Dr. Haraprasad Mitra (Head of the Department, Bengali and renowned poet), demanding his resignation citing neglect in basic amenities and began sit-in protest and hunger strike.

September 1-2, 1966: Student strike in Presidency College, Maulana Azad College, Goenka College in support of the boarders on hunger strike. Dr. Haraprasad Mitra resigns.

September 30, 1966: Some students of Presidency undergraduate section- Ranabir Samaddar, Amal Sanyal, Pranab Mukherjee, Sabyasachi Chakraborty and two others were expelled from the college and hostel. One student from Maulana Azad College was also expelled for inappropriate behaviour. Two others, Ashim Chatterjee, Sudarshan Roy Chowdhury and Ashok Sengupta were denied admission in the postgraduate section.

October 4, 1966: In protest against expulsion, the Principal, Dr. Sanat Basu (Department of Mathematics) was gheraoed. In the midnight he was rescued from the college by Calcutta Police and the protestors were dispersed by lathi charge.

October 5, 1966: Presidency College was closed for Durga Puja vacation, 1 week prior to its schedule.

The college failed to resume classes on November 10, 1966, post-vacation, due to continuing protests on the demand of cancellation of expulsion orders.⁹⁵ The college resumed four months later in February 8, 1967 after the stalemate ended. The agitation was not just limited to Presidency but spread to other institutes as well. Calcutta University though officially reopened after vacation could not function normally and had to be closed indefinitely on December 8, 1966 for the first time in its 110 years of existence.⁹⁶ Clashes with police became a common feature in the College Street area with events like stones being pelted at fire brigades,⁹⁷ police firing tear gas shells on demonstrators resulting injuries on both sides.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ "Presidency College Fails to Reopen: Determined Few keep the Rest Away", *The Statesman*, November 11, 1966, 1, 12; "Presidency College Remains Closed: Students Widen Range of Slogans and Demands", *The Statesman*, November 16, 1966, 1, 12; "Presidency College Closed Sine Die: Principal Rescued By Police After 8-Hour Detention", *The Statesman*, December 9, 1966, 1.

⁹⁶ "Students Picket University Gates", *The Statesman*, November 18, 1966, 1; "University and College Closed", *The Statesman*, November 20, 1966; "University May Be Closed Sine Die: 'Desperate Situation' – Says Registrar", *The Statesman*, November 23, 1966, 1, 12; "University of Calcutta Reopens Today", *The Statesman*, December 19, 1966, 1.

⁹⁷ Picture of 'Fire brigade men ducking to avoid stones aimed at them by demonstrators in action in front of Presidency College, Calcutta', *The Statesman*, December 10, 1.

⁹⁸ "Twelve Injured in Calcutta Clashes", *The Statesman*, December 11, 1966, 1; "Crackers Thrown at Police Truck", *The Statesman*, December 13, 1966.

The importance of this agitation lies in establishment of the right of students in unionisation and political participation as per their political ideological affinities. Till 1966 students in the Presidency College did not have the permission to organise around political lines. In the city apart from St. Xavier's college and Presidency, no other college was staunchly strict regarding unionisation and politicisation of students.⁹⁹ The threat of expulsion prevented students from acting against the norms because expulsion from a government institution meant the end of academic prospects. Ashim Chatterjee in his memoir notes the way in which the superintendent, Dr. Haraprasad Mitra dealt with student complaints regarding hostel. If any student complained of inconvenience, he was asked to join any other college like Ashutosh College after issuing Transfer Certificate from Presidency even in mid-session.¹⁰⁰ Student indiscipline served as a cover for inefficient maintenance of student-staff relations. As Sunanda K. Datta Ray notes in his article in *The Statesman*, that in Presidency College the Principal did not apologise for the lack of rapport between staff and students and is noted to have said, "I will carry on as my predecessors, according to the system I have inherited. When anyone talks about other systems, I ask them to seek a transfer to better colleges". Such unsympathetic reaction of a man who for 8 years presided over a premier educational institution was bound to have a reaction.¹⁰¹ Hence the success of this movement in an institute steeped in conservatism was quite an inspiration for other colleges across Bengal.

It has been noted earlier that attempt was made to formally establish an organised union after the food movement of 1965-66. The need was felt by the students to establish contacts with a student organisation and Ashim Chatterjee contacted BPSF (Left) aligned with the CPI (M) for support in establishing the Presidency College Student Federation unit. However, the distance with the CPI (M) increased with the approaching 1967 elections when the former advised the students to discontinue agitational politics and support their electoral aims. Both Dipanjan Roy Chowdhury and Ashim Chatterjee stated in their accounts that the nature of the party mandate changed.¹⁰² The same trend was noticed with the agitation of LIC workers and as well as the employees of the state bus corporation who had to withdraw their agitation within two days.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Roy Chowdhury, "Chhatro Andolan o Presidency College", in *Sattar Dashak*, 135.

¹⁰⁰ Ashim Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2022), 82.

¹⁰¹ Sunanda K. Datta Ray, "Local Issue Dressed up in Political Robes: Swing to the Left Traced to Frustrated Have-Nots, Revolt in College Street-I", *The Statesman*, December 21, 1966, 8.

¹⁰² Roy Chowdhury, "Chhatro Andolan o Presidency College", *Sattar Dashak*, 138; Chattopadhyay *Naxalbarinama*, 95.

¹⁰³ "State Bus Strike Over: Late Night Decision by Union", *The Statesman*, December 15, 1966, 2.

These student leaders were not direct members of the CPI(M) and hence refused to comply with the mandate.

Those radicals who were part of the BPSF were also expelled by the reformist leadership before and after the 1967 elections and all those expelled students organised themselves into a rival federation surrounding *Chhatrafauj*. The radicals were expelled not just in Calcutta but from the district bodies as well namely Dilip Pyne, Biresh Bhattacharya, Nirmal Brahmachari, Azizul Haque, Pralayesh Mishra, Asit Sinha, Dipak Biswas, Ashok Ghosh, Subhash Bose and Ashok Dasgupta. The expelled members found support from the new politically inspired students across districts.

The students and leaders of the Presidency Movement were not a unified group and had affiliations with different groups of radicals. Azizul Haque, Dilip Pyne were aligned with Sushital Roy Chowdhury, Saroj Dutta's Committee for Struggle against Revisionism (*Antar Party Sodhanbad Birodhi Sangram Committee*). Nirmal Brahmachari, Biresh Bhattacharya were linked with Amulya Sen, Kanai Chatterjee's *Dakshin Desh* group. Swadhin De, Pallab Goswami, Nimai Karan believed in socialist revolution. Ashim Chatterjee had links with Dalim Chakraborty, Pijush Saha led Surya Sen group. Affiliations to other groups like *Commune*, *Kashti Pathar* etc existed. All these groups functioned mainly in Kolkata and outskirts. In North Bengal, Dipak Biswas and Ashok Ghosh were linked with Charu Mazumdar directed *Maoist Centre*. Despite group affiliations, unity regarding the issues of student movement and allegiance to *Chhatrafauj* was common. The differences however widened after Naxalbari over strategy to be pursued between those who were directly linked to the *Chhatrafauj* and those who came to be associated with the Presidency Consolidation.¹⁰⁴

Presidency Consolidation (hereafter referred to as the Consolidation) is the name of an informal network of communication with Presidency at its centre which took shape in the aftermath of the college movement. The Consolidation can be considered to be the name of a trend of student agitational politics and consciousness that build up around Presidency College. It was not a narrow formal organisation nor was it limited to a specific group. As Roy Chowdhury notes, it is better to term the Consolidation as a process rather than a group or an organisation. Over time, the college lawn, portico of the new college building, college canteen and College Street Coffee House became the centre of mobilisation and networking. It was not confined only to

¹⁰⁴ Saibal Mitra, "Shhat Doshoker Chhatro Andolan : Paschimbanga" in *Sattar Dashak*, 76-77.

the students of the Presidency College. Students from others like Bangabasi, Surendranath, Scottish Church, Maulana Azad, Calcutta University PG Medical College came into this network. Youths from various other localities of Kolkata also joined in this network. There was an alternate office of the group in Taltala organised by some youth and hence this area also became an epicentre of student activism in Calcutta. Other areas included Garfa (Jadavpur), Rashbihari, Bagbazar, Belgachia, Beadon Street, Entally, Belegghata, Ballygunj etc.¹⁰⁵ Police actions in all these areas with young students embracing death due to police bullets can be noted. Role of the Consolidation was mainly about networking and communication. All the discussions that were held there were transmitted by the students and youth to their own localities, villages and cities across districts. The impact of the networking under this Consolidation can be seen in the form of movement spreading in various areas like in Howrah, Hooghly, Krishnanagar, North and South 24 Parganas like Baruipur, Ariadaha, Dakshineswar, Barasat etc. Notable were students like Santosh Rana of Rajabazar Science College who went back to their own villages resulting in a fresh wave of Naxalite uprising. After Naxalbari, discussion was held on the whether the Naxalbari centric movement of the college unit should be given an institutional form. The discussion on whether posters on Naxalbari and Mao should be put up in the campus and relevant slogans raised led to a decision in the affirmative.¹⁰⁶ The walls of College Street area of the period bear testimony of such activities.

¹⁰⁵ Roy Chowdhury, "Chhatro Andolan o Presidency College", in *Sattar Dashak*, 131.

¹⁰⁶ Roy Chowdhury, "Chhatro Andolan", 140.

Fig. 6
Walls of College Street

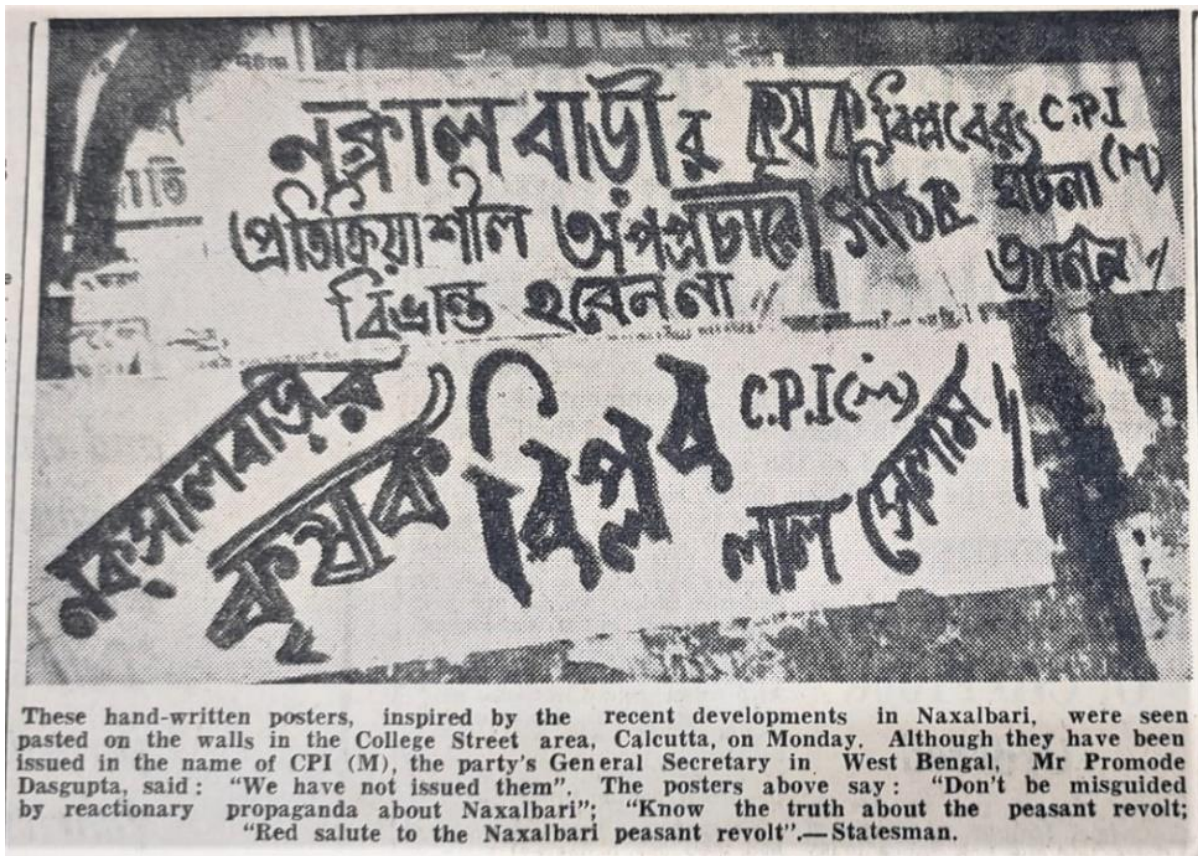


Fig.6: *The Statesman*, May 30,1967.

For the first time ever in the history of the college, the Presidency College magazine of 1968-1969 bore images of Lenin and Mao resulting in a huge stir both in official circles and in the student community itself (images attached below)¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Images of the College Magazine collected from the Presidency College Archives compiled and maintained by the Department of Sociology, Presidency University.

Fig. 7

Presidency College Magazine Cover (1968-1969)

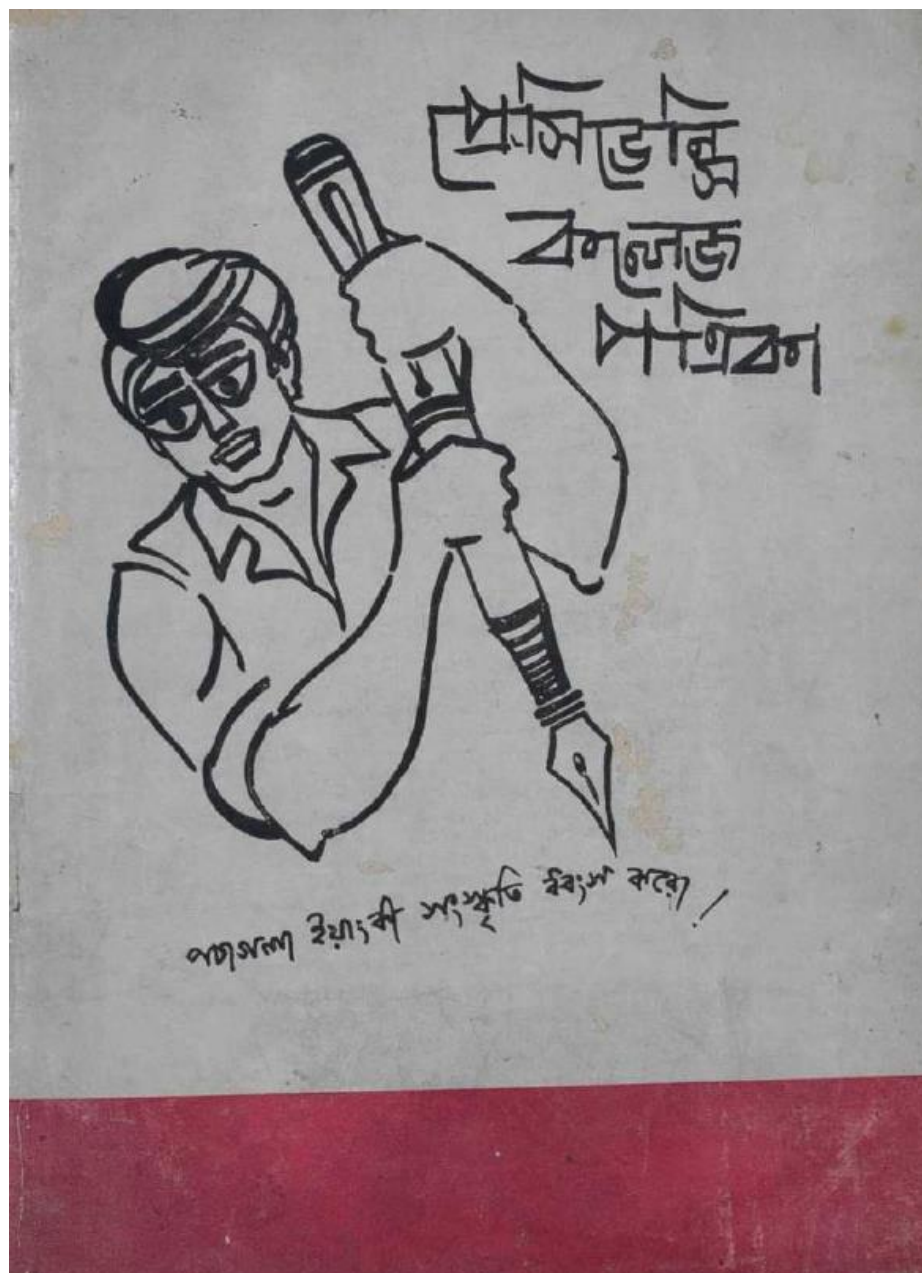


Fig.7: Collected from the Presidency College Archives

The cover caption in rough translation means 'Destroy the casual, redundant culture of ridicule'.

Fig. 8

Presidency College Magazine: Page 1 (1968-1969)

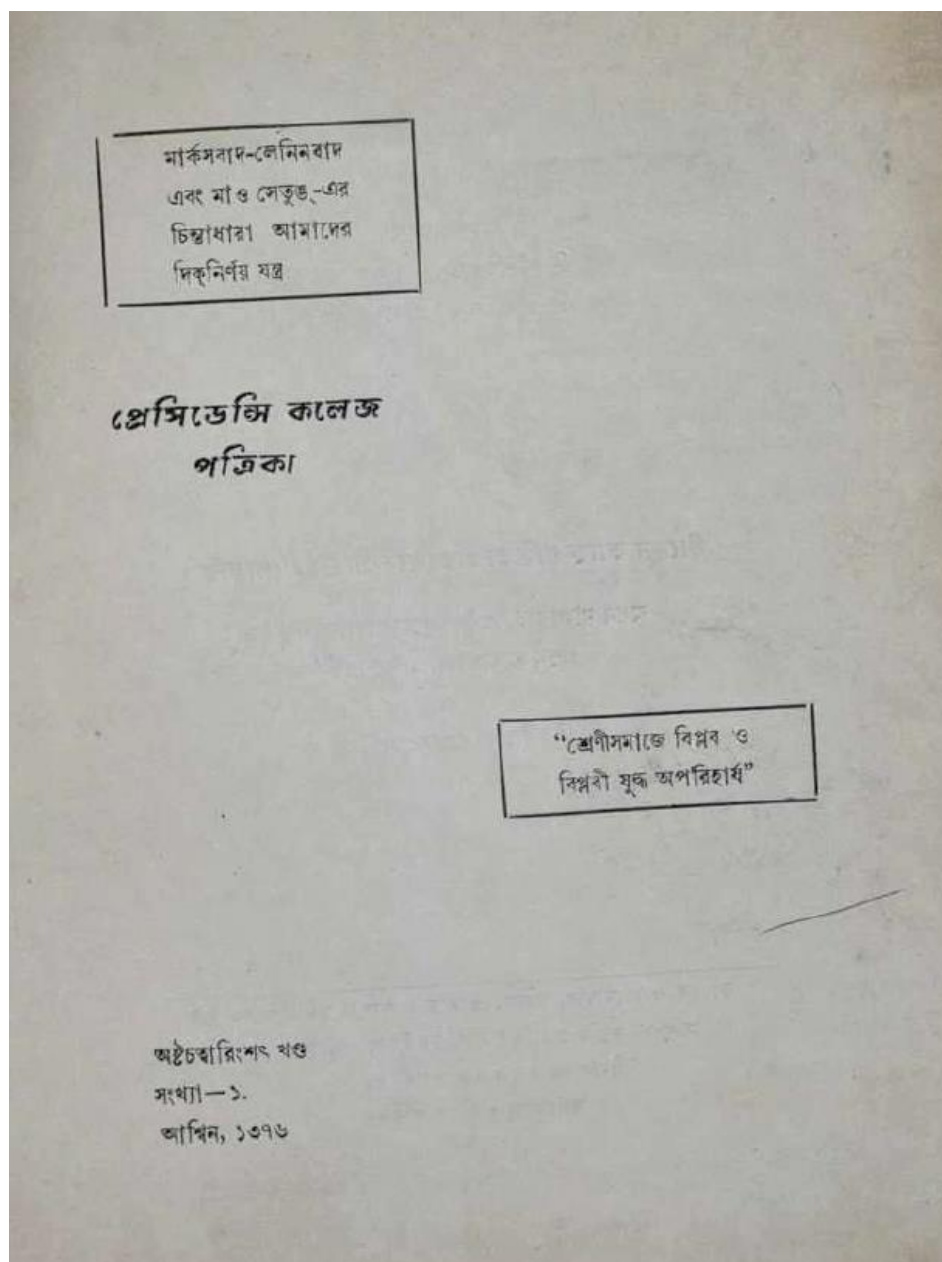


Fig.8: Collected from the Presidency College Archives

The top left caption translates as 'Marxism, Leninism and the Thought of Mao Tse-tung Provides us Direction'.

The right centre caption translates as 'In a Class Society, Revolution and Revolutionary War is Inevitable'.

Fig. 9

Presidency College Magazine: Page 3 (1968-1969)

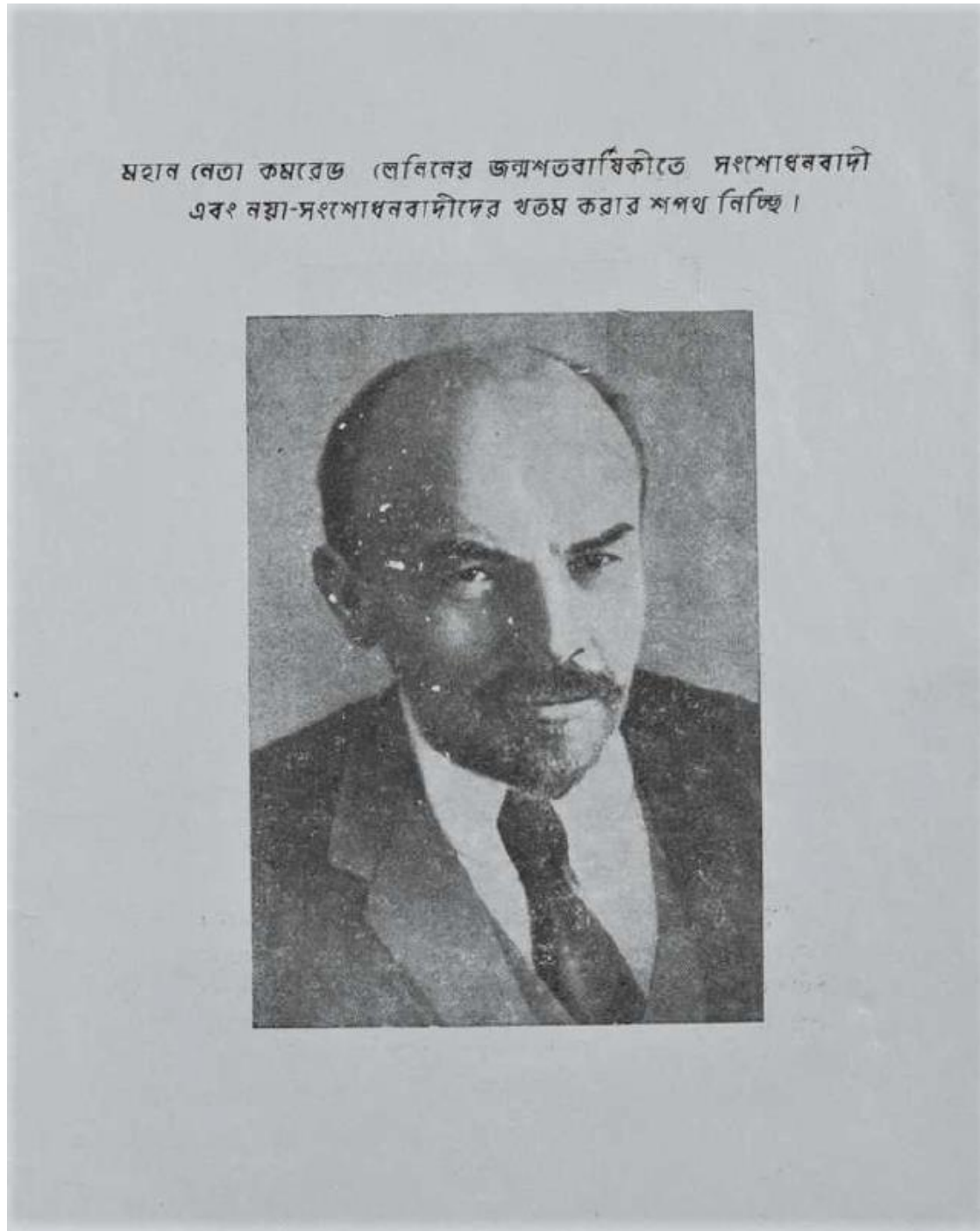


Fig.9: Collected from the Presidency College Archives

The top caption translates as 'On the Birth Centenary of Great Leader Comrade Lenin, We Pledge to Annihilate the Revisionists and Neo-Revisionists'.

Fig. 10

Presidency College Magazine: Page 4 (1968-1969)

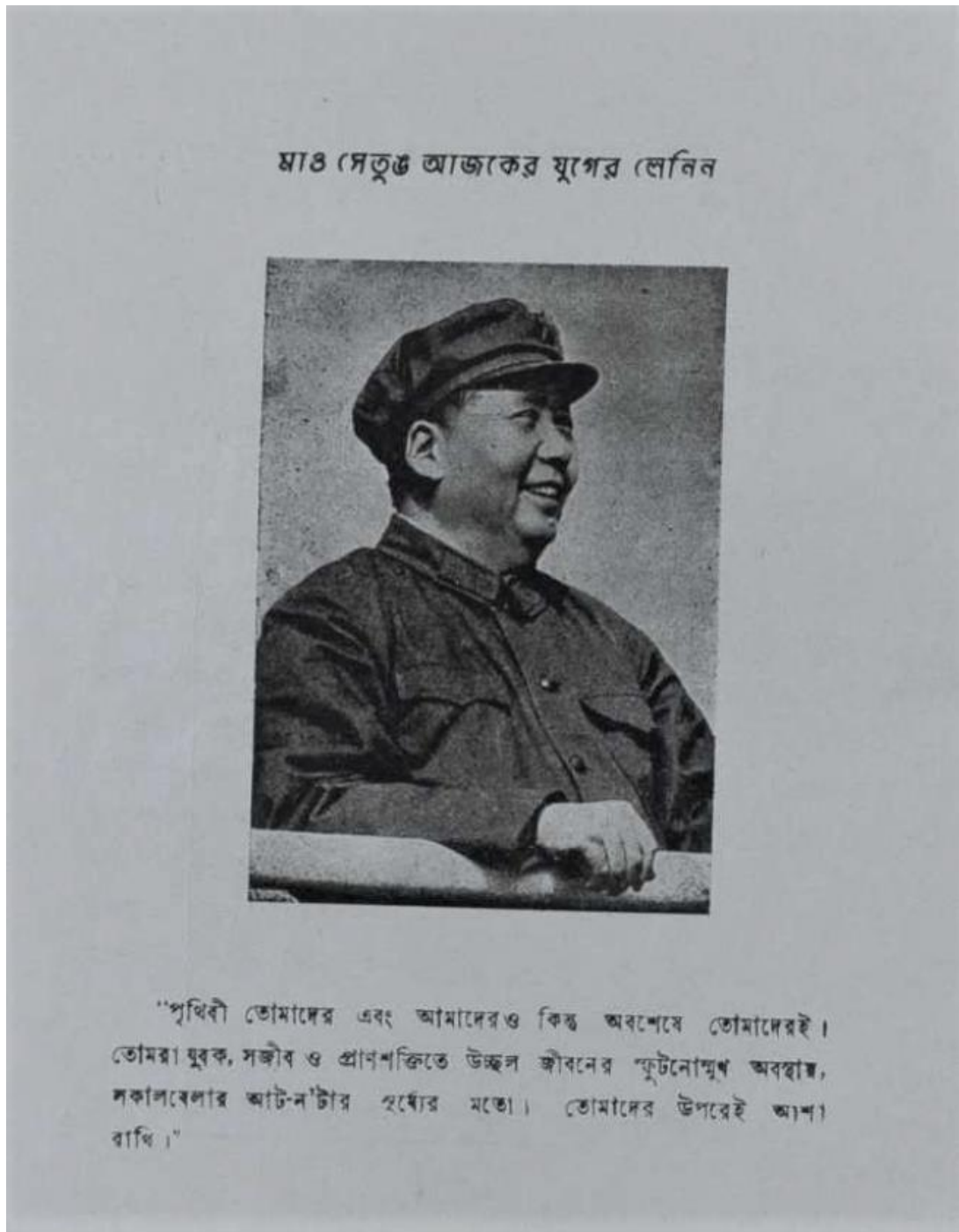


Fig.9: Collected from the Presidency College Archives

Top caption translates as, 'Mao Tse-tung is the Lenin of Present Generation'. The quote at the bottom is an excerpt from the talk at a meeting with Chinese students and trainees in Moscow, November 17, 1957. The English version can be quoted as follows, 'The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bottom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you....'

See <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch30.htm> for full text.

Ranabir Samaddar provides a very interesting analysis of the Consolidation networking and the nature of student activism. Referring to the agitations from mid 1960s as ‘Occupy College Street’, he refers to *gherao*¹⁰⁸ which was a labour movement tactic used noticeably by the rebellious students of that period. Besides *gherao*, one more word that became popular was *abasthan* meaning camping-in, sit-in or picketing. It could mean sit- in anywhere in support of a charter of demands.¹⁰⁹ The Presidency Consolidation was born in the aftermath of such agitational tactics.

The long closure of the college did not deter student mobilisation. The students camped at the gates, inside, and in the locality. Even after the college resumed functioning, the rebellious students camped in the college at night, and the college ran as usual during the day. He states,

The college lawn became the meeting ground for political discussions, strategy meetings, consultations. It was a rendezvous site, also a control room, where news of any attack on radical students or youth in any part of city would reach fast, support for comrades under attack would be mobilised, and help would be sent at Godspeed. In time both in the college and the hostel, crude bombs (called *peto*) and other handy tools for self-defence would be stored. After the dusk fell, the college lawn, the portico, and the corridors reverberated with animated discussions, exchanges of views, only to become silent as night progressed and weary, tired activists fell asleep. By morning the cadres would leave the precinct, the college would be returned to its due owners – students, teachers, administrative staff, police spies, etc...¹¹⁰

The activities of the students had myriad effects on the overall student community in Calcutta and was limited not just to the campus boundaries. Samaddar notes various such effects in a lucid fashion. First, the security of the college was dependent on the overall security of the vicinity and hence potential attackers there had to be neutralised. The students went out into the neighbourhood and befriended the people keeping all class vanity aside. All types of youth hence were drawn into the networking. Friendship led to comradeship making the college the common mobilising space. Secondly, links had to be forged with radical fraternities of other colleges and other localities. Units of students, youth organisations and trade union solidarity platforms merged in actions. Third, no potential enemy was to be allowed in the area or immediately beyond. Apart from mobilisation, unionisation, consciousness building, occasionally strong-arm tactic like bursting of bombs, students pelting stones at police vans, burning of buses etc, became common. Fourth, the college precinct became the site of planning for revolution. Political discussion was not just limited to the students and youth activists.

¹⁰⁸ Bengali or Hindi word meaning encirclement, somewhat like picketing.

¹⁰⁹ Ranabir Samaddar, “Occupy College Street: Notes from the Sixties”, 1-2.

¹¹⁰ Samaddar, “Occupy College Street”, 2.

others like union militants and organisers, political educators from the party took political classes in the evening. In those days with low communication facilities, delegates from far away college units like North Bengal University, would come to College Street without prior intimation to seek advice. Like Roy Chowdhury, Samaddar also notes that the Consolidation was not a formal body. The Presidency College lawn was not formally declared as the headquarters. There was no formal line of command. Activists were not present throughout day and night. They went out on organisational tasks, came back, convened consultations, and took decisions. It was more of a coordination of various active units across colleges and localities as well as among students and youth with workers and peasant as their activities spread to rural areas- in the factories of Howrah and villages in Midnapore.¹¹¹

Reverse narratives on the activities of the Consolidation also exist. It has been criticised for engaging lumpen elements and having anarchist tendencies. The posters and campaigns (like “*ghotona ghotao, faayda othao, shohore Che, grame Mao*”/ Stroke up trouble and reap the benefit, Che in the cities, Mao in the villages) of this group were directed towards attention seeking and were driven by emotions. They did not have clear and positive perception of the students struggle and they had rejected the work programme of the organised student’s movement or programmatic youth struggle. They are said to have deliberately sabotaged any initiative to build student association. The need for disbanding student and youth associations arose due to activities of the Consolidation¹¹². Leaders like Ashim Chatterjee and Dipanjan Roy Chowdhury however denied such allegations. Other leaders like Nirmal Brahmachari (who was noted to have been physically assaulted by Consolidation members) also do not hold a positive view of Consolidation activities. He criticises on various accounts the petty adventurism of the group and their arrogant, intolerant and violent attitude towards fellow student rebels who held different opinions.¹¹³

Difference in narratives is quite normal in turbulent times. Despite criticism, the role of the Consolidation and its impact cannot be ruled out. The large following the Consolidation garnered indicate that the militant orientation of the students were not merely due to economic discontent. Most of the students who dropped out of colleges and embraced hardships of village life had brilliant academic records and could have landed good jobs. Intellectual dissatisfaction with the dominant academic climate led them to the conclusion that the climate was a component of the larger social and economic crises, the escape from which lies in reforming

¹¹¹ Samaddar, “Occupy College Street”, 3-4.

¹¹² Saibal Mitra, “Shhat Doshoker Chhatro Andolan : Paschimbanga”, in *Sattar Dashak*, 77-78.

¹¹³ See Nirmal Brahmachari, “Saibal Mitra ke Lekha Chhithi”, in *Sattar Dashak*, 257-260.

the social order itself. The series of events in the turbulent decades culminating in the Naxalbari incident had shaken their belief in existing political parties and constitutional change. The orientation towards the politics of the armed present guerrilla movement was not confined to West Bengal students only. Their counterparts in other areas of India like Delhi had similar orientations towards the end of the 1960s.

The romanticism and mood of the youth was cultivated and utilised by Charu Mazumdar quite well. He could gauge the thought processes of the young mind and inspire them to take up the cause of the armed rebellion emphatically. Hence any discussion on students is incomplete without reference to the clarion call of Mazumdar in the pages of *Deshabrati* and *Liberation*. Mazumdar advised the students to leave schools and colleges and plunge into the revolutionary struggle. The logic behind this was the boys and the girls in the country were being influenced by educational institutions in a way, that they looked down upon the poor masses of workers and peasants and became lackeys of imperialist power. The courses that the students are following were limited to passing examinations. The age between 18 and 24 is the period when one can work the hardest and can be vigorous, courageous and loyal to own ideas. The education system did the opposite. He noted that this was the logic behind Mao's idea that the more one reads, the more fool they become. The sole hallmark of the revolutionary students and the youth was to integrate with the peasants and the workers and the first step towards such integration was to go to the villages in large numbers.¹¹⁴ This was his advice to the students,

Form small squads of students of the schools and colleges in your locality. Each squad should have 4 or 5 students. Then make your programs for going to the villages even when you have short holidays of only 4 or 5 days. No squad should be formed with girls alone. This is because girls would need some kind of shelter for spending the night. Each of you should take with him a copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung*. Take as little money with you as possible and other articles in a kitbag. Once you go to the village you are not to seek comforts and good food or shelter. Rather, you should compete with one another in enduring hardships. You should not stop and stay at anyone place except for spending the night. You should always be on the move and go from one village to another walking fifteen miles a day on the average. During the journey make acquaintances only with the poor and the landless peasants, learn from them, read out quotations from Chairman Mao to them and acquaint them with Mao Tsetung Thought as much as you can...

You should remember that this work that you are doing as students and youth is one of open propaganda. So, never try to contact any party organisation or comrade of any area during this journey through the villages...

Make this campaign a festive occasion all over the country.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Charu Mazumdar, "A Few Words to the Revolutionary Students and Youths", in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. II, ed. Ghosh, 89. Published in *Liberation*, III, no.5 (March 1970).

¹¹⁵ Mazumdar, "A Few Words to the Revolutionary Students and Youths", 92-93.

The Red Guard squad action as noted in different areas is a reflection of such organisational ideas. The students and youth were advised to organise Red Guard squads in localities and in schools and colleges. One of the squad members should be made the commander and take a specific area for squad work. These Red Guards would not only carry on the struggle in favour of the poor, landless peasants and workers but also rally behind workers in the cities during their struggles or strikes. In clashes between the workers and the police, the duty of the Red Guards was to support the former and take part in the clash alongside them. He advised that the strategy for counterattack was to be based on guerrilla tactics.¹¹⁶

The *Draft Political Programme for the Revolutionary Student and Youth Movement*¹¹⁷ shed further light on the issue of student activism. The Programme stated that the basic orientation of the youth and the student movement in the country at the present time must be to attain the immediate object of establishing a people's democratic state through agrarian revolution and on its basis attain the long-term objective of building a socialist India. The student movement must be integrated with a struggle of workers, peasants and other toiling people in building armed agrarian revolution. The broad masses of youth and students were the main force in the struggle and a few advanced elements among them must build and lead them. The advanced section must lay special emphasis on building of struggles on the basis of various problems and difficulties affecting the life of the broad masses of the youth and students like food, education, unemployment and devise methods and tactics to ensure their mass participation. Contacts must also be established with people who live in places close to the areas in which they work, with workers and illiterate people who live in slums and towns and cities and the peasants in the villages and become one with them. Those youths and students who were more advanced in theory and practice must go to the villages (unless circumstances made it impracticable for the) and to work there among the peasants as whole-time workers under the guidance of the revolutionary party.¹¹⁸

One example of the emotional call of Mazumdar can be provided here to reflect the use of sentiments that inspired a bright generation to be part of a revolution,

¹¹⁶ Mazumdar, "A Few Words to the Revolutionary Students and Youths", 93-94.

¹¹⁷ The Draft was prepared by the West Bengal State Students' Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries and represents the political line pursued by the AICCCR on the student and youth front. It appeared in *Deshabrati* (February 20, 1969) and in *Liberation*, II, no.6 (April 1969).

¹¹⁸ West Bengal Students' Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries, "Draft Political Programme for the Revolutionary Student and Youth Movement", in Ghosh, *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. II, 315-316.

Hundreds and thousands of martyrs who fell in the battle now call upon you, students and youths, to rise up and fight. The day has now come at last when we must settle their blood-debts, and overthrow the imperialists and the reactionary exploiting classes.

The Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist, therefore, calls upon the youths and students to go to the workers and the poor and landless peasants with firm conviction, for only they can end the peasant oppression and humiliation.

Today, the Party has only one appeal to make to our students and youth: Integrate with the workers and poor and landless presents. Integrate! Integrate!¹¹⁹

Activities of the Consolidation as discussed earlier in this section can be seen contiguous to such lines. All the main members like Ashim Chatterjee and Santosh Rana became part of the new party, CPI (M-L) and left colleges to build up revolutionary struggles in the villages leading to a spurt in militancy in the agrarian areas in the late 1960s to be discussed in the next chapter.

We can conclude this section with a very interesting observation that was penned in *The Statesman*, December 21, 1966,

Ask an undergraduate what he will do after graduation and the answer is “M.A.” After that a Ph.D, then the student falters. Look for a job perhaps or scholarship, or, maybe, research. One reckon is that only five percent have their careers charted out. Questioned about this economic frustration one of the agitators retorted: “We do not look at things like that. That is typically bourgeois interpretation.” But that is precisely how the young and the immature facing a bleak future do look at it. Not he perhaps: he is one of the few born into middle class respectability and can, therefore, affect to place ideology above a career but not for the others. For them, *it is through personal anxiety that a public stance is born*. Waxing passionate about it, a 27-year-old student of Philosophy denounces the bankruptcy of his life, a *bankruptcy that is social, economic and emotional*. The substance of conversation is bitter. They live in squalid messes, sit listlessly through the mechanical drudgery of lectures delivered by uninspiring and underpaid teachers, swill tea in grubby cafes, perhaps see an occasional film and ...talk. *Conversation breeds ideas* – old and hackneyed ideas maybe but ideas nevertheless; it creates also the organised effort to implement them. *Politics is a release from tension* and if it creates tension of another kind that at least is laced with excitement. “*Anarchy is born out of frustration*” adds another. He has been reading a college magazine that describes the two horizons that dawn before students today in Asia, Africa and Latin America. “They can turn either to a reactionary military dictatorship or seek a democratic revolution.” One is left in no doubt about his choice and that holds good for many others.¹²⁰ (*Italics for emphasis*)

¹¹⁹ Charu Mazumdar, “Party’s Call to the Youth and Students” in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol. II, 36.

¹²⁰ Sunanda K. Datta Ray, “Local Issue Dressed up in Political Robes: Swing to the Left Traced to Frustrated Have-Nots, Revolt in College Street-I”, *The Statesman*, December 21, 1966, 9.

Chapter 5

The Naxalite Uprising in Midnapore & Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Frontier: Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora

By 1968 the radical uprising in the Naxalbari area was waning but two pockets in erstwhile undivided Midnapore district became radicalised under the influence of the expanding network of CPI (M-L), inaugurating a fresh phase of upsurge in Bengal. The movement in Debra-Gopiballavpur – Baharagora assumed special importance because the second United Front government was in power and the violent nature that this upsurge assumed in a very short time, resulted in the unleashing of the repressive machinery of the state, both under the United Front as well as by the Congress ministry under Siddhartha Shankar Ray that followed. Within a short span of time, the movement was able to rouse and mobilise the peasantry, which along with armed squad actions though confined to small pockets, was able to upset the status quo in the countryside of the erstwhile calm areas in frontier Bengal-Bihar-Orissa.¹

In Bengali accounts of the movement, it is common to refer to this activism as *abhyutthan* which can be roughly translated to mean upsurge or uprising, given the escalation speed and fast dissipation amidst repression. The upsurge in the three regions were linked together by the formation of Bengal -Bihar-Orissa Border Regional Committee (BBOBRC) of the CPI (M-L) in 1969 which became the programmatic centre and coordination point for all the activities in the region. The committee had 13 members – Ashim Chatterjee, Bhabadev Mandal, Gunadhar Murmu, Shakti Mandal, Ranabir Samaddar, Santosh Rana, Mihir Rana, Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, Pradip Banerjee, Moni Chakraborty, Leba Chand Tudu, Pradip Singh and Bankim Nayek. Of the 13, 5 belonged directly to the Presidency Consolidation. The Committee action area comprised the districts of Midnapore and Bankura of Bengal, Baharagora and Chakulia of Singhbhum district of Bihar and Balipada, Sulipada and Bangripashi police stations of Mayurbhanj district of Orissa.²

The various regional /area committees of the CPI (M-L) that came under the centralized directive of BBOBRC were as follows,

¹ Currently the frontier area is to be noted as Bengal-Jharkhand-Odisha.

² Amiya K.Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics in West Bengal: An Experiment in Armed Agrarian Struggle* (Calcutta: Firma K.L Mukhopadhyay Pvt. Ltd, 1984), 156-157

Table 5.1
AREA COMMITTEES OF THE CPI (M-L)³

Area Committees	Name of Secretaries
Gopiballavpur	Lebachand Tudu alias Lal
Jhargram	Gourango Nayek alias Shakti
Debra - Chandrakona	Gunadhar Murmu
Panskura	Barun Sarkar
Kharagpur – Midnapore	Kabidas Mukherjee alias Niru
Baharagora – Chakulia	Susanta Jha alias Sujay
Balipada	Mihir Rana
Contai-Tamluk	Bidhan Maity
Bankura	Amitabha Bose

Source: Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics*, 157.

Though the spread seems to be quite extensive, the activism was confined to few pockets and not evenly distributed throughout. The movement was coordinated by a region-specific leadership and the regional-centralised leadership of BBOBRC. In the entire organisation Ashim Chatterjee⁴ of the famed Presidency Consolidation had a central role to play. In each of the three main spots of Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora specific leaders played an important role in organising the activities. For Gopiballavpur, the important names are Santosh Rana, Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, Pradip Singh, Bankim Nayek, Dipak Das, Lebachand Tudu, Pradip Banerjee, Tharpa Mandi, Amulya Kalapahar and few others though the main initiation can be credited to Santosh Rana. For Debra, the important names are Bhabadeb Mandal, Gunadhar Murmu, Nitai Das, Shakti Mondal, Ranabir Samaddar and Dilip Sarkar out of which the first two have been the main local steering force whose activities can be traced to the pre-Naxalbari days. In Baharagora, the leaders were Ashim Chatterjee, Moni Chakraborty, Deben Nayek, Susanta Jha, Murari Mukherjee, Sudeb Chakraborty, Bina Nayek, Swaraj Chakraborty, Rabin Nayek, Satyaban Nayek, Bhabani Nayek, Bipin Nayek, Sundar Hansda to name a few out of which Moni Chakraborty and Deben Nayek played the central role. In the Chakulia belt names like Jayashri Rana, Utpalendu Chakraborty, Mahendra Nayek alias Bhola, Banamali

³ The existence of non-residents (five out of nine) heading committees must be noted here. Only two of the secretaries belong to the tribal community out of which only Gunadhar Murmu had a political background as active worker of CPI and CPI (M). Six of these nine were either students or have just completed education. Five of them did not have a peasant background or any close association with peasantry.

⁴ Also referred to as Ashim Chattopadhyay across Bengali accounts. Both refer to the same person.

Nayek are the important ones amidst others.⁵ Thus, three sets of activists can be identified. First, local leaders disenchanted with CPI (M) already active in Debra, Keshpur, Daspur, Midnapore areas leading resistances against administration and mobilising people. Second set was the local youths of this region who were studying in the urban areas and were exposed to the trajectories of the Left mobilisation. Third, offshoot of the student youth movement in Calcutta, inspired first by Majumdar's teachings and calls of the newly formed CPI (M-L).

The nature of the movement in this region displays two trends- mass movement with popular participation and squad action -annihilation line that replaced the former in a short span of time amidst state repression. Before delving into the trajectory of the upsurge it is essential to have a quick glance at the location and the nature of the regions in question.

Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora: Regional Profiles, Inter -Regional Connections and Socio-Economic Conditions

Debra and Gopiballavpur are not contiguous areas. Debra is located in the centre-east part of the district while Gopiballavpur is in the south- western frontier. During the period under study both were part of undivided Midnapore district. Though both are predominantly rural areas, differences exist in geographical features like soil, cultivation pattern, population and revolutionary legacy.

Debra had an active legacy of agrarian struggle pre-1960s, unlike Gopiballavpur and Baharagora. Surrounded by areas like Keshpur, Daspur and Ghatal which were active spots during the Tebhaga movement, peasant mobilisation against jotedars can be traced to the late 1950s due to the activities of the Krishak Samitis, when evictions of the sharecroppers had increased post the Land Ceiling Acts and during the survey settlement operations of 1956. Geographically the Debra *thana* (police station) area comprises of fertile plains of the Kangshabati river and cultivation here is quite rich with high quality paddy as well as other crops like mustard and flowers like sunflower etc. This naturally follows that this particular area had been the focal point of feudal exploitation owing to the existence of a large number of jotedars, moneylenders, hoarders and other business interests looking for gains. With many rice mills, the area had been a locus of black marketing as well. The forces of the landlords

⁵ Susanta Jha, "Simanta Obhuthan o Baharagora Songram" in *Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora'r Krishak Bidroho, Liberation Cry* (December 16,1970), 12. Pamphlet in Bengali personally collected from Prithwiranjan Dasgupta alias Meghnad. Year of publication unavailable.

were also organised and in every single village they had 10 to 12 guns.⁶ The majority of the agricultural labourers were either tribals or belonged to the lower castes of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Owing to the huge requirement of labour during the harvesting season, a large number of labourers who were seasonal were brought in from Jhargram Subdivision (of which Gopiballavpur was a part) along with contiguous areas of the Junglemahals, because the agricultural state of the latter was quite dismal given poor soil quality. Seasonal migration provided the demographic link between these two areas. One report in *The Statesman* noted that the old residents of Debra were of the opinion that the Santals had settled in the area mainly after the great ‘flu epidemic’ in 1918 when large tracts in the area were depopulated.⁷ Currently, Debra is part of Kharagpur Subdivision of West/ Paschim Midnapore district.

Gopiballavpur is located on the banks of Subarnarekha River, in a tri-junction frontier area with Bihar (currently Jharkhand) and Orissa. As Santosh Rana notes, if one progresses into the Gopiballavpur *thana* area the feeling dawns that this area doesn’t belong to Bengal given the geography and the demography. The Chhota Nagpur plateau merges here into the slopes of the Subarnarekha and leaving aside some villages on the sides of the river, the majority of the area is characterised by lateritic red soil and conditions are so harsh that cultivation, until recently was quite a laborious task. According to the 1960s map of India, Gopiballavpur is bordered by Orissa’s Mayurbhanj district in the south and Bihar’s Singhbhum district in the west. Only those who come to the area in connection to their jobs like school teachers, bank officials, various officers connected to government offices can be seen speaking the Bengali language. The dialect here is a unique mix of Bengali and Oriya/Odia.⁸ It was only in 1980 that the bridge Sidhu Kanu Setu was constructed over the Subarnarekha giving direct access by road to Gopiballavpur. Before that to reach the area, one had to cross the river and walk over sand riverbed for more than a kilometre and if one had to reach the interior villages, a minimum walk of 15-20 kilometres was normal.⁹ Once across the river, the area was cut off from the rest of the district. On the north-west and south-west, dense forests sealed it from both Singhbhum

⁶ Gunadhar Murmu, Bhabadeb Mandal, “An Analysis of the Debra Peasant Movement”, in *Historical and Polemical Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol. II (1964-72) (Vijayawada: Tarimela Nagi Reddy Memorial Trust, 2008), 737.

⁷ *The Statesman*, December 3, 1969.

⁸ In the recent years a huge research area in linguistics and culture studies have opened up in connection to this dialect which is referred in this region as *Subarnaraikhik Bhasha* with a special set of cultural practices, folklore etc. The dialect is noted to be a unique mix of south – western frontier and partially *Jharkhandi* Bengali along with an Odia dialect specific to the northern parts of Odisha.

⁹ Santosh Rana, “Gopiballavpure Foshol Katar Abhuthyan ,1969”, in *Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora’r Krishak Bidroho*, 6.

and Mayurbhanj. Given such nature of the area, feudal relations and feudal forms of exploitation was quite common and strategically suitable for Naxalite activities.

Gopiballavpur has a legacy of its own much before it came to spotlight as a Naxal hotspot. The area did not have this name before the 17th century. The earlier name is believed to be Kashipur or Kashpur and was the farmhouse of Rohini royal family, The Shyamananda (Vaishnavacharya who was entrusted with preaching Vaishnavism in Orissa) - Rasikananda (son of zamindar of Rohini, Achyut Pattanayak) duo are considered to be founders of the Vaishnav cult in this south-west Bengal frontier area and responsible for transition of Kashipur/Kashpur to Gopiballavpur. The first reference to the name Gopiballavpur appears in 1648 in *Rasikmangal* of Gopijanballav Das. Over time it became known as the centre of a strand of Vaishnavism referred as Sripat - Gopiballavpur, Thakurbari or Gupta Vrindavan.¹⁰ . The Goswamis of Gopiballavpur, dating back to Rasikananda, is a very potent socio-cultural force in the region till date. Administratively Gopiballavpur was a part of and was linked to the Nayabasan pargana which in turn was the cutcherry of the Raja of Mayurbhanj. Thus, this entire region was once part of the Bhanjabhum- Baripada dandapat of Orissa. The area had been a frontier zone in Bengal -Orissa conflicts during the Nawabi and British periods. In 1761 Ali Vardi Khan signed a truce with the Marathas demarcating Subarnarekha as Bengal -Orissa border with the northern part/bank being demarcated as Bengal and the southern bank as Orissa. The part of Nayabasan pargana and Rohini area that remained in the northern section became part of Bengal while Nayabasan and Gopiballavpur remained in Orissa. These areas came under Bengal presidency only after the Anglo -Maratha wars and defeat of the latter in 1803, after which entire Orissa came under British control.

Gopiballavpur police circle was created as late as 1871 having jurisdiction over Beliabera, Sankrail, Nayagram and Gopiballavpur. This was the first time when Gopiballavpur received an administrative status independent of Nayabasan. In 1922 Jhargram Subdivision was created including Jhargram, Gopiballavpur and Binpur police stations. On January 10, 1945 Gopiballavpur police circle was divided with separate circles Nayagram, Gopiballavpur and Sankrail. In 1947, Gopiballavpur police station was divided into Gopiballavpur and Beliabera. Post-independence period saw setting up of four developmental blocks – Gopiballavpur 1, Gopiballavpur 2, Sankrail and Nayagram blocks.¹¹ On January 01, 2002 Midnapore was

¹⁰ Madhup De, *Gopiballavpur* (Midnapore: Kabitika, 2021),13

¹¹ Madhup De, *Gopiballavpur*, 40-41

divided into East and West. Tamluk, Kanthi, Haldia and Egra Subdivisions became East Midnapore. Ghatal, Midnapore, Kharagpur and Jhargram Subdivisions became West. Gopiballavpur was part of Jhargram Subdivision and stayed in West Midnapore. On 4th April, 2017, Jhargram Subdivision was constituted into a separate district and hence currently this area is part of Jhargram district.

The census data of 1961 and 1971 can be a reference point for understanding these areas given the period under study. The number of recorded villages as per village directory in Debra police station area was around 487 while in Gopiballavpur police station area it was around 630.¹²

Table 5.2

**NUMBER OF INHABITED VILLAGES, AVERAGE POPULATION PER VILLAGE AND
NUMBER OF VILLAGES PER HUNDRED SQUARE MILES: CENSUS 1961**

Name of Area	Area in sq. miles (rural area)	No of inhabited villages	Total persons (rural)	Average persons per inhabited village	Number of inhabited villages per 100 sq. miles of rural area
Debra	130.4	453	101,720	225	347
Gopiballavpur	184.9	484	103,627	214	262

Source: B. Ray, *Census 1961 West Bengal: District Census Handbook, Midnapore*, Vol I (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1966), 46.

Debra was a part of the Sadar Subdivision of the district which also included Midnapore, Salbani, Keshpur, Garhbeta, Amlagora, Balichak, Sabang, Pingla, Kharagpur, Narayangarh, Dantan, Mohanpur, Keshiari. Gopiballavpur was part of the Jhargram Subdivision which also included Jhargram, Jamboni, Binpur, Sankrail, Nayagram. The tables below at a glance can provide an idea of the total population, the caste-tribe composition and the sections of workers drawing livelihood totally from land. Understanding the caste -tribe configuration of the population is important to grasp the issues raised by the Naxals in the area and the overall participant base of the upsurge. In an agriculture predominant area, the lower castes and tribes form the bulk of the sharecroppers and labourers and hence turn out to be the most exploited in the feudalistic jotedar-moneylender system prevailing in the countryside. Quite naturally

¹² For names of villages see B.Ray, *Census 1961 West Bengal :District Census Handbook, Midnapore*, Vol II (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1966),100-103 (Debra), 465-469 (Gopiballavpur).

they will be the first target of mobilisation for uprising. Naxal students and youth coming in from the urban areas armed with Mazumdar's teaching and tactics first moved into those villages where this disgruntled section stood in majority.

Table 5.3

1961

PRIMARY CENSUS ABSTRACT

MIDNAPORE DISTRICT											
TOTAL POPULATION		SC		ST		WORKERS		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
4,007,569	334,286	531,300	32,106	324,557	5179	1,313,813	93,281	776,709	5114	281,719	4268
(4,341,855)		(563,406)		(329736)		(1,407,094)		(781,823)		(286077)	
DEBRA (SADAR SUBDIVISION)											
TOTAL POPULATION		SC		ST		WORKERS		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
101,720	6,333	10,157	705	15,745	411	34,737	2,203	16,911	208	12,298	109
(108,053)		(10,862)		(16,156)		(36,940)		(17,119)		(12,407)	
GOPIBALLAVPUR (JHARGRAM SUBDIVISION)											
TOTAL POPULATION		SC		ST		WORKERS		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
103,627	-	12,665	-	26,218	-	42,093	-	20,998	-	14,636	-

Note: Total population – Total number of persons enumerated including inmates of institutions and houseless persons, SC- Scheduled Caste, ST- Scheduled Tribe, R- Rural, U-Urban

Source: B. Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, 26-29.

In Midnapore more workers were engaged in the primary sector as rural population formed the dominant proportion of the total. For every 1000 general category workers, 556 were engaged as cultivators and only 203 as agricultural labourers, while among Scheduled Castes (SC), cultivators numbered 426 and labourers 334, for a 1000 of total SC workers. Women workers

as agricultural labourers were common among SC. For every 100 SC women, 44 were agricultural labourers, while for every 100 General category women, 34 were labourers.¹³

Table 5.4
SCHEDULED CASTES

MIDNAPORE DISTRICT							
TOTAL		WORKER		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
531,300	32,106	187,956	10,183	83,701	793	64,628	1563
(563,406)		(198,139)		(84,494)		(66,191)	
DEBRA (SADAR SUBDIVISION)							
TOTAL		WORKER		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
10,157	705	4077	101	1441	-	1513 Male: 304, Females: 1,209	20
10,862		4178		1441		1,533	
GOPIBALLAVPUR (JHARGRAM SUBDIVISION)							
TOTAL		WORKER		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
12,665	-	6149	-	1,133	-	3,150 Male: 1,520 Females: 1,630	-

Note: R- Rural, U-Urban

Source: B. Ray, *Census 1961*, Table C-VIII, Part -A, 310-311.

Every 8th person in the district of Midnapore belonged to the Scheduled Castes (SC). In the rural sector 13.26 % belonged to SCs, mostly living in the Sadar Subdivision where they accounted for 34.09 percent of the district's total population. In Debra they formed 10.05%

¹³ B. Ray, *Census 1961 West Bengal: District Census Handbook, Midnapore*, Vol I (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1966), 97.

while in Gopiballavpur they constituted 12.22 % of the population.¹⁴ In Debra *thana* area, in terms of the total number of persons, the SCs Bagdi/Duley and Sunri (excluding Saha) had the highest numbers above 2000 followed by the, Namasudra, Khaira, Dhoba/Dhobi, Dom/Dhangar, Bhuiya, Chamar/Charmakar/Mochi, Muchi/Rabidas/Ruidas/Rishi, Haris, Mals, Doai, Bauris and Kaora ranging from 100- 500. The other castes having numbers below 100 were Bahelia, Bhuimali, Jalia-Kaibartta, Karenga/Koranga, Mehtor, Pan/Sawasi, Pasi, Rajbansi. Agricultural labourers were the highest in Sunri and Khaira castes, 522 and 119 respectively.¹⁵

In Gopiballavpur *thana* area, the highest number was constituted by the Bagdi /Duley caste with population above 6000 with Dhoba/Dhobi and Dom/Dhangad having numbers above 1000 and Bhuimali, Jalia Kaibartta above 900. The others were Bhuiya, Rajwar, Hari, Mal, Bauri, Bind, Chamar/Mochi, Ghasi, Lohar, Kaur, Methor, Namasudra, Pan/Sawasi, Karenga/Koranga. Maximum agricultural labourer belonged to the Bagdi caste and among the female population of Bhuimali and Bhuiya castes.¹⁶

In the rural tracts of Midnapore every 12th person in the 1960s belonged to any of the Scheduled Tribes (STs). Census data notes that STs of the district mostly lived in the Sadar Subdivision. Nearly 50 % of the total tribes of the district were to be found in this Subdivision which is followed by the Jhargram Subdivision where 45.32 % resided. These two Subdivisions together accounted for a little less than 95 % of the total STs of the district. Eastern Subdivisions like Contai, Tamluk register very less proportion of this population. The existence of the tribals in the Sadar Subdivision can be explained by the migration tendencies to this area from the western half for livelihood. Of all the tribes, Santals were the major STs in Midnapore forming 70.78 % of tribal population in rural areas and 77.89 % in urban areas like Kharagpur which accounted for nearly 1/3rd of the total urban Scheduled Tribes of the district due to railway settlement and workshops with labour requirements. Other towns with ST population were the Chandrakona area, Midnapore town area, Jhargram, Balichak, Garhbeta.¹⁷ Majority of tribal workers were engaged in agriculture which absorbed 90 % of workers among the tribals. Of

¹⁴ Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol I, 91-92

¹⁵ Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol I. 326-327. Data based on Census Table SCT-I, Part A.

¹⁶ Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol I, 368-369. Based on Census Table SCT-I, Part A.

¹⁷ Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol. I, 98-99.

them 44 percent were engaged as cultivators and about 46 % as agricultural labourers. Female tribals were favourably engaged in agricultural operations as labourers.¹⁸

Table 5.5
SCHEDULED TRIBES

MIDNAPORE DISTRICT							
TOTAL		WORKER		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
324,557	5,179	171,438	1,638	75,608	205	77,945	438
329,736		173,076		75,813		78,383	
DEBRA (SADAR SUBDIVISION)							
TOTAL		WORKER		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
15,925	411	7945 Male: 3,419 Females 4,526	116	1,819	2 (Female)	5598 Male: 2,368 Females 3,230	5 (Female)
16,336		8,061		1,821		5,603	
GOPIBALLAVPUR (JHARGRAM SUBDIVISION)							
TOTAL		WORKER		CULTIVATOR		AGRICULTURAL LABOURER	
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
26,218	-	14,049	-	6,629	-	6,328 Males 3,203 Females 3,125	-

Note: R- Rural, U-Urban

Source: B. Ray, *Census 1961*, Vol I, Table C-VIII, Part B, 312-313.

In Debra *thana* area, the highest tribal population belonged to the Santal community numbering 11,046 in the rural areas with 4098 as agricultural labourers and 1178 as cultivators. The Bhumij came second numbering 1687 with 108 as cultivators and 403 females only as

¹⁸ Ray, *Census 1961*, West Bengal, Vol I, 102.

agricultural labourers. The others were Mundas, Mahali, Kora, Lodha/ Kharia/Kheria and Ho. The record also notes unclassified population of 1070.¹⁹

In Gopiballavpur *thana* area, the highest tribal population belonged to the Santals numbering 17,848, with above 4000 in the category of cultivators and labourers each. Mundas had a population above 6000 and Bhumij with above 1000. The other tribes were Lodha / Kheria/Kharia, Mahali, Kora, Mal Pahariya and Oraon. The record also notes unclassified population of 30.²⁰

As far as interest in land and size of land cultivated in rural areas of the district are concerned, the Census report of 1961 taking 20% sample of all households, records the maximum number of cultivating households in rural areas belong to less than 1 acre to the category of 2.5 to 4.9 acres among the Scheduled Castes. Same trend is noticeable from the ST data.²¹

In western Midnapore tracts, of which Gopiballavpur is a part, ecology had been and is still a constraint. Paddy has been the principal crop in the district with three harvesting seasons- *Bhadoi* harvest in relation to *Aus* paddy (around April to June), *Haimantic* harvest in relation to *Aman* paddy (around September to December) and *Ravi* harvest in relation to vegetables and pulses (around November /December to March). Given the ecological requirement of the crops cultivated and the overall topography, agricultural activities in major parts of western Midnapore were limited to the cultivation of a single crop i.e. *Aman* paddy which has a sowing season during the monsoons and harvesting in winter.²² Similar features regarding land use can be related to the Baharagora region as well. The importance of the famous *Badhna* or *Bandna* festival celebrated mainly among the tribals and also lower castes engaged in agriculture till date in this belt of West Bengal along with Jharkhand and Odisha, where cattle and agricultural tools are worshipped as well as paddy sown, lies in the fact of this being the sole annual source of food. *Makar Sankranti* is also an important festival linked to harvesting season and it also marks homecoming for the tribals of the western half engaged as labourers elsewhere in the district like in Debra region.

¹⁹ Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol I, 376-378. Based on Census Table SCT-I, Part B.

²⁰ Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol I, 390-391. Based on Census Table SCT-I, Part B.

²¹ Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol I, 395-396. For details see Table SCT-V Part A.

²² Satyesh Chakraborty, "Western Midnapore- A Study of Land Use", in, Ray, *Census 1961, West Bengal*, Vol I, 147-148.

Baharagora is currently located in the Ghatsila Subdivision of *Purbi* (East) Singhbhum in south-east Jharkhand. During the 1960s, Baharagora was part of the Chota Nagpur Division of Singhbhum district of Bihar. As per the Census report of 1961, the district Singhbhum was bounded by Ranchi and Purulia (West Bengal) in the north, on the east by Midnapore district (West Bengal), on the south by Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts of Orissa and on the west by districts of Ranchi and Sundergarh (Orissa).²³ Located in the south-east corner bordering Midnapore and Mayurbhanj, it merges both in topography, demography and culture with its tri-junction partners. Till date if one visits this area, it will be difficult to associate it as part of Jharkhand given the fact that the language spoken here is a typical mix of Bengali and Odia, with Hindi featuring less in common conversations.

This particular district has its fair share in the account of the legacy of resistances covered in this study. When the East India Company received the grant of the *diwani* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, the territory covered by the district lay to the west of the Junglemahals of Midnapore. The formal origin of the district by its name can be traced to 1837 after the subjugation of rebellion by the Ho's. Before that the areas can be traced to be part of Dhalbhum. The Junglemahals had to be pacified by force during the commencement of revenue administration by the Company and the resistance in Ghatsila during the first phase of the Chuar resistances has already been noted earlier in this study. This was followed by the Bhumij rebellion and finally the Kol insurrections which forced the British to make adjustments. The South West Frontier Agency was established by Regulation XIII of 1833. Dhalbhum which was included in Midnapore district was transferred to Manbhum Division. After conquest of Kolhan, the district of Singhbhum was constituted and in 1846, Dhalbhum was transferred from Manbhum. Intermittent readjustments continued culminating in the post-independence linguistic reorganisation in 1956 with the Bihar and West Bengal Transfer of Territories Act which transferred a large part of Manbhum district to West Bengal. Certain police stations of erstwhile Manbhum district were added to Singhbhum.²⁴ In 1990, the district was divided into East (*Purbi*) and West (*Paschimi*) and the area under study is currently part of the former.

According to 1961 census, 78.50 % of the district's population was rural. Scheduled castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) form a significant portion of the population. Total population

²³ S.D Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar: District Census Handbook 17, Singhbhum* (Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1967), i

²⁴ For details see Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, ii -v

SCs (rural and urban) was 58,889 and STs 969,811, together comprising 50.23 % of the population. The greatest concentration of the SCs in Singhbhum was noted in Ghatsila and Baharagora *Anchals* (Subdivision) comprising 4.28 % of the *Anchal* population. The main SCs of the area were Ghasi, Dom /Dhangad, Dhobi, Chamar /Mochi, Pan/Sawasi, Hari/Mehtar/Bhangi. 969,811 persons comprising 47.31 percent of the district were STs. The highest tribal groups are the Ho followed by Santal, Munda, Bhumij and Oraon to name the top five.²⁵ The following census tables of 1961 and 1971 can in glance provide an idea of the area in question.

Table 5.6
CENSUS 1961
DISTRICT SINGHBHUM
CLASSIFICATION OF WORKERS (RURAL)
CULTIVATORS AND AGRICULTURAL LABOURER

Total	POPULATION	WORKERS	CULTIVATORS	AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS
RURAL	1,609,260	912,972	614,758	139,543
AGE GROUPS WITH MAXIMUM PARTICIPANTS				
0-14	655,591	94,978	55,753	15,189
15-34	539,133	467,415	307,324	70,785
SCHEDULED CASTES				
-	39,713	21,228	6,084	5,512
SCHEDULED TRIBES				
-	932,503	555,536	397,820	83,553

Source; Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, 26-27, 72,74.

Table -5.7
1971 CENSUS ABSTRACT
DISTRICT – SINGHBHUM, DIVISION – CHOTANAGPUR

	POPULATION	SC	ST	WORKERS	CULTIVATORS	AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS
T	2,437,799	87,962	1,124,317	809,170	331,132	225,497
R	1,798,035	57,547	1,050,855	623,467	325,512	218,687
U	639,764	30,415	73,462	185,703	5,620	6,810

Note: SC- Scheduled Caste, ST- Scheduled Tribe, T-Total, R- Rural, U-Urban.

Source: B.L Das, *Census of India, 1971: Bihar* (Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1973), 12-14.

²⁵Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, xvi- xxxvi.

The rural population to total population according to the above 1971 data stood at 73.76 %. The rural ST percentage to the total population was 43.10 %. Cultivators and labourers put together constitute 67.25 % of the total worker population.

Baharagora area of Singhbhum has been an important area in the Naxal uprising of Midnapore. The Census 1961 defines Baharagora village as a small with a population of 466 and is the headquarters of an *Anchal* with the same name. It is situated in the tri-junction of Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa at the meeting point of highways from Calcutta to Bombay and Calcutta to Ranchi and is connected to Orissa via a bridge over the Subarnarekha.²⁶ This area has been predominantly a rural and agriculturally based area. Based on 20% sample households, out of 3426 total number of households in Baharagora *Anchal*, 2269 households were engaged in cultivation only, thereby forming the majority.²⁷ Brief abstract from 1961 Census data of the area has been provided below

Table 5.8
BAHARAGORA ANCHAL
(RURAL)
1961

	POPULATION (Workers & non-Workers)	CULTIVATOR	AGRICULTURAL LABOURER
TOTAL	84,524	17,681	14,591
SC	Total -3625	346	523
	Worker- 1,949		
ST	Total – 29,911	8,635	8,364
	Workers- 18,137		

Source; Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, 32-33, 72,74.

As far as economic characteristics were concerned, about 70.6 percent of workers in the district were engaged in cultivation and agricultural labour. If the proportion per 1000 workers are taken into account, 583 persons were cultivators and 123 were labourers. The proportion of cultivators and labourers were higher in the female category than males.²⁸ In terms of nature of cultivating households, 91 percent in the district cultivated lands owed by them. Only 1 percent cultivated unowned lands held from private persons or institutions for payment in money, kind or share, while remaining 8 percent had mixed tenancies of both the aforesaid kinds. The Report

²⁶ Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, lvii.

²⁷ Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, 46

²⁸ Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, xliii-xliv.

however expressly states that the possibility of concealment of information regarding sharecropping cannot be ruled out entirely.²⁹ Regarding size of landholdings, 72.8 percent of households were noted to own lands below 5 acres. A little over one tenth i.e. 11.71 % owned land less than 1 acre and two-fifths (43.63 %) had less than 2.5 acres each.³⁰ The Report notes that out of a total area of 32.98 lakh acres, the cultivated area (both net sown and current fallow) was 8.71 lakhs acres i.e. 26.5 % of total area. Out of this, the gross irrigated area in 1961 was 0.69 lakh acres which had declined from 0.72 lakh acres in 1951.³¹

The principal rivers are Subarnarekha and South Koel with the former establishing its connection with Bengal's Midnapore, both of which are seasonal affecting cultivation. Such statistics hint at the overall state of livelihood in the area. Lateritic nature of soil, erratic monsoons, seasonal river flow, low irrigation infrastructure, subsistence on small lands with an annual crop made life difficult. With majority of population depending on agriculture, relations of production are bound to be unfavourable to the lower strata of agrarian hierarchy making it a fertile ground for resistance to brew. Hence, the upsurge building up in Midnapore had a spill-over effect in the areas like Baharagora due to personal networking of the rebel minded people, though on a very limited scale.

Nature of Exploitation: Few Instances

From the aforesaid account the overall socio-economic condition of the area under study becomes clear. All the three areas were predominantly rural and land relations, prevalent during this time in the rest of Bengal, persisted here as well. The jotedar- moneylender class in majority belonged to the caste Hindus like Sadgops, Telis and Khandayets. In Gopiballavpur-Baharagora, the tribals dominated the agricultural labourer population while in Debra both tribals as well as lower caste agricultural labourers existed. The condition of the agricultural labourers was also not the same in both regions. Debra being fertile alluvial tract with extensive cultivation, the labourers had access to work most of the time of the year. Irrigation was advanced in Debra region as well. The block of Gopiballavpur can be divided into roughly two topographical parts. Along the bank of the river lies the stretch of alluvial plain – fertile and productive. It is known as '*Kulat*', a derivative of the word "*Kul*" meaning riverbank. The population here consisted of different Hindu intermediary castes (like Sadgops, Telis etc.),

²⁹ Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, xlviii.

³⁰ Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, xlix.

³¹ Prasad, *Census 1961, Bihar*, li.

some Brahmins, different Dalit castes (Bagdi, Mal, Dom, etc) and few Muslims. The area of high lands, some distance away from the river, give way to the forest zone- known as *Bankhand* (literally *forest-part*) and was inhabited mainly by the Adivasis – Santals, Mundas, Lodha-Sabar, Kora, and others (Santals forming about 80 percent of the total Adivasi population). The Hindu upper and intermediary caste people were mainly the middle peasants living in the villages on the banks of Subarnarekha where soil quality was better. Service-holders were few in number. The Dalits were mostly landless agricultural labourers, which differentiated them from the Santals who had land ownership to some extent.³² As Mihir Rana notes, the middle castes came to possess the better off lands by gradual dislocation of the tribals from these areas. Though many tribals owned lands and ploughs, the poor soil quality and the high interest charged by money lenders resulted in poverty and they moved into the neighbouring villages as agricultural labourers during the harvesting and cultivating season. This movement to alluvial tracts during the cultivating season is known in this region as *Namal khata* i.e. going to the lower regions for labour.³³ Apart from seasonal migration, many stayed back either as day labour in the jotedar's house all throughout the year or as sharecroppers in the *sanja* cultivation system prevalent in Midnapore. This trend was visible in the Debra -Balichak region. Another prominent caste in the region were the Malla-Kshtariyas who were generally employed as *lethels* or armed henchmen of the landlords and moneylenders.

The status of the Mahanta Goswamis of Gopiballavpur as a socio-religious force has already been mentioned earlier. They had around thousand acres of *debottar*³⁴ property. The property was spread over the entire thana area. In Gopiballavpur mouza, the lands of good quality were under their direct control while the lands in the forest zones, located in distant areas from Gopiballavpur were under sharecropping cultivation, mainly by the tribals. After the rains labourers came from distant villages with their own bullocks and ploughs (as the Goswamis

³² Kumar Rana, *Changes and Unchanges in Rural West Bengal*. Essay personally collected from author. The Bangla title of the essay was *Paschimbanger Gramanchale Paribartan Aparibartan: Ekti Anu Samiksha*. Pagination in Kumar Rana's document unavailable. The essay was translated from Bengali by Biswajit Sen. It was written in October 2005 and first appeared in *Kaladhwani* (December 2006), a Bangla periodical and later included in a collection of the author's essays entitled *Aksharer Kshamata Kshamatar Akshar* (Kolkata: CAMP, 2007).

³³ Santosh Rana, *Rajnitir Ek Jiban* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2017), 47; Mihir Rana, interviewed by the author (Mohulbani, Gopiballavpur: March 5, 2021).

³⁴ *Debottar* lands are estates granted rent free the proceeds of which were appropriated to worship and support the temple establishment. Such estates were built out of donation. The rights of the donor lapsed immediately after donation. The property was inalienable and indivisible but temporary leases extending to the life of the *sebayet* /*mahant* (manager or superintendent of the establishment) was the practice.

did not have any) and used to cultivate the lands. In the harvesting season, they harvested and stacked the produce of lands for the Goswamis without any wage. They used to get food that is *prasad* of the temple which mainly was puffed rice. After harvesting of the *Aman* paddy, the Goswami collected the share from the sharecroppers.³⁵ The people had a mixture of fear and reverence for the Goswamis and during the upsurge the only action that was mobilised against them was forcible harvesting of their crops. Apart from Goswamis, other jotedars in the area were Kars and Hotas of Chandri, Praharaj family of Beliabera, Sarengis of Rohini, Mondals of Rogra to name the big ones employing agricultural labour, *sanja* cultivators, house helps (*muliyas*- male, *kamins*- female and *bagals* meaning shepherds- children).³⁶

The exploitation by the moneylenders in the region was quite rampant. Rana notes in his memoir that in the absence of banks, moneylenders were the source of loans and interest rate was quite high. Cash transactions were not present and paddy loan was the norm. The main problem with paddy loan was the type of measure used. There was no weigh balance but a container made out of bamboo or cane, locally known as *maan*. The size of *maan* that was used while providing the loan was different from the size being used during repayment, which was bigger.³⁷ Apart from interest the loanee had to provide gifts and free services as well.³⁸ Mihir Rana, while recalling his childhood days, provides an interesting example of the use of *maan*. Relatives of the Ranas were in the moneylending business and as kids of the house, they were called in to provide assistance in measuring grains in return for a chicken meal. To use his own words, ‘We were rebuked and punished for counting the *maans* as 1, 2, 3, 4. Instead we were asked to count the *maans* as 1, 1, 1 followed by 2,2,2 and continue in the same fashion.’³⁹

³⁵ Santosh Rana, “Gopiballavpure Foshol Katar Obhuthyan ,1969”, in *Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora’r Krishak Bidroho*, 7; Ashim Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2022), 134-135.

³⁶ Santosh Rana, “Shomoy, Sangram O Gopiballavpur”, Interview in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, XVII, no. 3 & 4 (October 2014-March 2015), 244-245.

³⁷ Similar descriptions of fraud in measurement and cheating on innocent tribals are noticeable in the various accounts on the causes of the Santal rebellion in 1856. Kalikinkar Dutta in his work *The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57* notes, ‘on the approach of the harvest season, those moneylenders set out on their annual tours of collection with bullock carts and horses. They picked up a stone on the way, and having painted it with vermilion to show the correctness of its weight... By weighing with the help of the aforesaid piece of stone, the mahajans took away almost the whole produce of the lands of their debtors, still leaving them overburdened with debts... those moneylenders kept two sets of weighing scales- (1) *Kenaram* or *Bara Bau*, the capacity of which was a little more than that of the ordinary measure and which was used by them for weighing the crops that they took from their debtors, and (2) *Becharam* or *Chota Bau*, the value of which was below that of the standard measure and which was used for weighing articles lent to the Santals by them.’ Even after a century the prevalence of similar practice in independent India imply the perpetuation of feudal relations in the agrarian setting of rural India. For details see Kalikinkar Dutta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing, Reprint 2017), 1-6.

³⁸ Rana, *Rajniti*, 22.

³⁹ Mihir Rana, interviewed by the author (Mohulbani, Gopiballavpur: March 5, 2021).

Thus, even when 3-4 *maans* of grains were taken away, the count remained 1. This implies the way in which the innocence of the loanees were exploited.

The tribals were a big source of exploitation for these moneylenders. In his account of a village named Pitanaui, Rana notes that tribal families used to take paddy loans in the monsoons (June - July) and return with 1.5 times interest post-harvest of the *Aman* paddy in winter. If the production was less, debt trap followed automatically. The jotedar -mahajan would confiscate the defaulter's cattle and plough as well. In the 1960s, out of 60 tribal houses in the village, apart from the Hembrams, nobody had access to rice as food all throughout the year.⁴⁰ Apart from paddy loans, there were mahajans who used to loan money by mortgaging belongings and land papers, jewellery etc. The rate of interest was 2 paisa to 1 anna per 1 rupee of loan in a month. At 2 paisa, the rate of interest stood at 37.5 percent and at 1 anna it stood at 75 percent.⁴¹ Such was the burden that many small and middle peasants also lost their possessions to loans.⁴² In 1968, the production of paddy was not sufficient and the price of the basic staple had inflated in the entire state. Rana's own village, Dharampur was in general quite well off given the better nature of soil but even in such village out of about 150 families, only few had access to rice twice a day. People had to replace rice with gram flour (*Chana Chhatu* or *sattu*).⁴³

The condition of the agricultural labour class is evident from Rana's account of the caste Danda Chhatra Manjhi⁴⁴ in his birthplace Dharampur village. This caste was totally landless and many did not even have homesteads. They used to live in small huts either on jotedar's lands or on government lands in common spaces like roadside etc. Both men and women of this caste worked as agricultural labourers during cultivating seasons or were attached for generations in labour to a jotedar's house all throughout the year. There were no fixed working hours for such job. Their remuneration stood at 10-12 maunds of paddy (1 maund = 37 kilos) annually, one

⁴⁰ Rana, *Rajniti*, 47.

⁴¹ 1 rupee = 64 paisa = 16 anna; 1 anna = 4 paisa; 1 anna = 1/16th of a rupee.

⁴² Rana, *Rajniti*, 24.

⁴³ Rana, *Rajniti*, 5.

⁴⁴ The 1961 census locate this caste as a type special to Midnapore. The caste traces its origin to the role of a Manjhi who, in place of the earthen pots (*danda/dhunuchi*), used to carry the burning charcoal in his own hands during Lord Shiva's Charak puja. They believe their original occupation to have been fishing which they maintain as well as are cultivators and day labourers. Many of their women are employed as maidservants, even by high caste Hindus, but are not allowed to touch water for drinking or cooking purposes. In the 1901 census they were treated as a sub-caste of the Bagdis, though they do not recognize each other as being related. The Bagdis in turn are a caste with a very low ranking in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Originally fishermen, this caste has also become mainly agricultural labourers. The source of the name Bagdi can perhaps be linked to Bogri pargana which existed to the north of Midnapore. See Ray, *Census, 1961*, Vol.1, 59; Jogesh Chandra Basu, *Medinipurer Itihas* (Kolkata: Annapurna Prakashani, BS 1426; 2019), 369, 377.

dhoti (cloth worn around the loins), one *genji* (vest) and one *gamcha* (Indian towel generally printed). Their children did not go to schools and provided services like grazing cattle. Those women and men who worked as labourers on daily wage basis received one to one and half kilos of paddy respectively even in 1970. As work was not available around the year and agricultural production was erratic, shortage of food was a common phenomenon. In place of rice, they had to depend on the seeds of a particular kind of grass (*shyama*) for staple diet.⁴⁵ They also used to depend on small fishes, crabs, snails, oysters, fresh water snails (*gerry-googly*) available in local ponds and paddy fields.⁴⁶ The seeds of *Kendu* (*Diospyros melonoxylon*/ East Indian Ebony) were also consumed like puffed rice. This account is important as it helps to grasp the state of existence of certain groups in the area that made them susceptible to any positive propaganda for change. From the description of food, it may appear that starvation was absent as protein was available in diet from natural sources, but this source of food has a typical class dimension to it. In present day, *shyama* rice may have made its way into upper class households as an item of choice, but given the period of study it was quite disheartening and frustrating for a labour who did not have access to a plateful of rice after a day's hard work.

In Debra, the wage of agricultural labourers was 6 annas in case of women and 10 annas in case of men but no jotedar paid that amount. Hence increase in wages was one primary issue raised in the Debra movement.⁴⁷ The nature of the exploitation here had an added dimension apart from the regular ones common in agrarian Bengal. Given the rich rice production in the area, a huge number of rice mills existed in the Debra -Balichak area. Majority of the labour in such mills were the tribals and scheduled castes. Food crisis and the resultant policies of the Congress government, increase in the price of rice, cordoning system, imposition of levy of 25 % on mills in 1958, threw these mills out of operational balance. In 1964 the Congress government adopted a policy of acquiring the rice mills to run them on a cooperative basis imposing up to 50% levy.⁴⁸ As a result of such policies many mills began shutting down in the region, with many workers losing their jobs. The economic base of the region was disrupted

⁴⁵ Commonly known as jungle rice, *shyama chal* (rice), is a type of wild grass and millet, the seeds of which, is being used in present times as a high fibre alternative to rice especially during fasts and in dietary regimes.

⁴⁶ Rana, *Rajniti*, 8-9.

⁴⁷ Shakti Mondal, "Amar Shomoyer Debra", Interview in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 210.

⁴⁸ This was hiked to 65% of the rice milled to be provided to levy and allowing remaining 35% to be sold in the open market. In 1969, the Food Corporation of India urged price controls on levy free rice in the market which was not considered economic by many mill owners. See *The Statesman* report, "Adequate state control over West Bengal Rice Mills Urged" (October 15, 1969).

due to loss of jobs which in turn resulted in increase in number of people seeking work in the agricultural sector. Surge in the number of agricultural labourers worked to the advantage of the jotedars who could now acquire labour even at very low wages. A young industrious labourer was made to work 12-13 hours during sowing and harvesting season and given less than a kilogram of wheat as remuneration. The labourers had options either to have a menial existence with suicide as the ultimate solution, embrace robbery as profession or unite in struggle against exploitation. They opted for the last line of action, with the local militant peasant leaders taking initiative demanding increase in wages, occupation of benami lands and land redistribution.⁴⁹

Regarding land alienation, accounts exist in relation to Bhola village of Gopiballavpur and Surmuhi of Baharagora, which were important points of the Naxal upsurge. Both villages were dominated by the Malla Kshatriyas (Mal or Malla meaning wrestler), a community having a militant fighting lineage traced to the *paik* militias and *barkundazes* of the Rajas of Mayurbhanj and Dhalbhumgarh. On account of their service, they had for generations enjoyed service tenures like paikan and ghatwali jagirs. However, they were cheated out of their possessions by middle castes like Telis, Sadgops and Khandayats. In the context the village Barasol of Bengal (primarily a Sadgop village with Ghosh and Karan as predominant surnames), which is a neighbourhood village of Surmuhi has been crucial. A history of enmity between the Mals and Sadgops of two villages existed, where the Mals accused the Sadgops of deceiving them out of their lands, some of the latter becoming notorious jotedars of the area.⁵⁰

Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora: Trajectory of the Upsurge

The legacy of popular resistance in the district till the Tebhaga Movement has already been noted in details in the previous chapters. In post-colonial Bengal various activities implying resistance to government actions had taken place even before the late 1960s. Resistances have been noted in the 1950s against arbitrary eviction of sharecroppers and the notorious *sanja* mode of cultivation prevalent in the district. Midnapore had remained a CPI stronghold and in the 1950s different types of movements were noted. 1952 saw a movement among the educated section regarding political prisoners centred in Midnapore town along with activism in Tamluk, Kanthi and Garhbeta. The second was the ‘Save Education’ movement against government

⁴⁹ Shyamapada Bhowmick, “Naxal Andolan: Prekkhapot”, in *Medinipur: Itihash O Sankritir Bibartan (Purba O Paschim)*, Vol. IV, ed. Pranab Roy (Calcutta: Sahityalok, 2010), 468-469.

⁵⁰ Rana, *Rajniti*, 40-41; Susanta Jha, “Simanta Abhuthan o Baharagora Sangram” in *Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora'r Krishak Bidroho*, 14.

policy of retrenching teachers and employees in the primary school level. Peasant leaders Deben Das, Nikunja Choudhury lead the formation of a District Save Education Committee and the Krishak Praja Party, Kisan Sabha, Forward Bloc, Jan Sangh, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti participated in the forum. Deben Das and Bhupal Panda also organised a food movement against arbitrary seizure of paddy and cordoning system in early 1950s.⁵¹ It must be noted here that Bengal was in total turmoil during this period and the movements that rocked Calcutta and other parts of Bengal like the teachers' movement of 1954 and the food movements of 1959 and 1966 had its impact on the district. Major portions of the district had been pushed to the verge of starvation, especially in the frontier areas. *The Times of India* reported 'many deaths' due to severe scarcity of food in the Gopiballavpur area in mid-1953⁵². This was natural given the overwhelmingly agricultural dependent rural nature of the district and the condition of Bengal in relation to food. On July 14, 1959 people of Midnapore town, Contai, Tamluk, Khejuri, Garhbeta, Bhagabanpur picketed before law courts and BDO offices led by CPI and PIFRC⁵³. Processions, strikes in protest against food policy was common and the communist leaders of Tebhaga fame like Bimala Majhi were in the forefront of these resistances. Food movement of 1966 also had quite an impact. Another set of struggles specific to the area was in the context of West Bengal- Bihar merger. CPI opposed the merger and given the party's stronghold in the district, the effect was prominent with Congress -CPI supporters clashing in different parts of the district, mainly in the eastern part.⁵⁴ Given this background, it becomes obvious that the eastern counterparts of Debra have a legacy of different types of political activism ranging from moderate to radical, which is bound to have its influence on the political culture of Debra forming the launch-pad for the late 1960s upsurge. The remote and difficult to access location of the Gopiballavpur region had made it less susceptible to the oppositional politics of central and eastern Midnapore regions and the upsurge of the late 1960s was imported into the region from outside by local and Calcutta based students-youths.

⁵¹ Anwesha Sengupta, "The Prairie Fire Spreads I: Medinipur", in *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, ed., Ranabir Samaddar (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2018), 172.

⁵² *The Times of India*, July 29, 1953.

⁵³ Suranjan Das and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay, eds., *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting A Turning Point in The History of West Bengal* (Kolkata: K P Bagchi, 2004), 6

⁵⁴ See Shamita Sarkar, "The Role of the Communists in the Anti Bengal – Bihar Merger Agitation", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 74 (2013) :921-24

Pre- Annihilation Phase: Debra

Peasant activism in Debra can be traced to 1950s, with its scale increasing in 1967. Village and area samitis were already in place, which had organised movement against the eviction of sharecroppers. By 1966-67, the area was organised and ready for the next phase. The United Front's ascent to power in Bengal replacing the Congress provided the impetus to such struggles. The call for stepping up mass initiative to redress agrarian issues resulted in the local activists taking steps to build mass struggles. It has already been noted earlier that Debra, being a fertile tract and a major paddy producing area with rice mills, was a pivotal operation area for black-marketing and hoarding. Given the overall socio-political climate of the 1960s, upsurge against the hoarders came as the first reaction. Raids on black-markets by armed demonstrators took place in large village markets (*haats*) like Balichak, Radhamohanpur and Malihati. This movement escalated into demands for increase in wages of agricultural labourers all throughout the Debra *thana* area.⁵⁵ Another programme of mobilisation in the area was the bamboo cutting movement. In August and September, the peasants generally had to depend on paddy loans but once they started movement against the jotedars, the latter took the stance of not providing such loans. Hence boiled bamboo shoots or sprouts served as an alternative source and as bamboo was also located in fields owned by others, harvesting it became a rallying point.⁵⁶

Local leaders like Bhabadeb Mondal, a lawyer by profession, was initially a member of CPI and after the 1964 split had joined the CPI (M). He had contested the 1967 elections as a candidate of the latter where he had polled 6099 votes in contrast to 19,851 of Bangla Congress. Though defeated he was quite popular in the area which stemmed from the fact that he fought the land related cases of the peasants in the area. Gunadhar Murmu, a local tribal peasant leader was another face of the Debra struggle. Shakti Giri, Nitai Das, Ganesh Majhi, Arjun Hembram and others played a crucial part in mobilisations. The local leaders built up public connect in the region in various ways. Nitai Das noted in an interview that they would visit the peasants, listen to their issues, enrol them as krishak samiti members, take them to hospitals for treatment thereby building confidence. Das had even learnt Olchiki (Santali language) to communicate

⁵⁵ Debra Thana Organizing Committee, CPI (M-L), "Revolutionary Armed Peasant Struggle in Debra (West Bengal)", in *The Historic Turning- Point: A Liberation Anthology*, Vol I, ed. Suniti Kumar Ghosh (Calcutta: 1993), 264. First published in *Liberation*, Vol. III, No.2 (December 1969).

⁵⁶ Shakti Mondal, Interview in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 216.

with the tribal masses better. After this base was build, attempts were made to gain *patta*⁵⁷ rights on vested lands. The leaders would provide details of lands that were available and peasants were encouraged to decide in whose name application was to be dropped in the J.L.R.O office. For instance, if any village had 10 *kathas* of vested lands, the villagers were asked to decide who were in dire need of *patta* rights. Applications were dropped after such decisions were made. Gunadhar Murmu and Nitai Das were main mobilisers in this regard. First successful act of this type was noted in Belar village.⁵⁸

It was under Mandal's initiative that Midnapore District Coordination Committee of the CPI (M) revolutionaries was formed in Debra in 1968. Mandal was the convener while Murmu and Pyne were members.⁵⁹ With the base for movement already in place, the spark came with the Naxalbari incident. By September 1967, the militant orientation was noted. *Deshabrati* (October 5, 1967) reported the commencement of a unified anti-eviction resistance by labourers, sharecroppers, small and middle peasants. In the face of atrocities and legal actions by the jotedars and the police, thousands of peasants braving incessant rains took out a procession and *gheraoed* the Debra police station after walking 16 miles on September 27, 1967. Slogans like 'we will not tolerate attacks by black-marketeers and jotedars', 'we will not tolerate bureaucratic attitude of the United Front government', 'withdraw all false cases against farm labourers and peasants' were raised. They even raised slogans demanding release of Jangal Santhal and other peasants of the Terai, withdrawal of warrants against Kanu Sanyal, 'Naxalbari *Lal Selam*' (Red Salute) etc. It must be noted that the district leadership of CPI (M) did not support this and tried to negotiate withdrawal stating that they would discuss matters with the DSP and DM. However, the militant peasants did not budge and the administration had to pay heed to their demands.⁶⁰ In addition to the peasants, student activism was also noted. and clashes between Congress workers and the Student Federation were reported. Strikes were organised across Midnapore district in November 22 and 23 ,1967 protesting attacks on students by agents of Congress.⁶¹

Mass participation was a common feature in Debra. On November 21, a peasant's convention was held in Belar village under Debra *thana*. Peasants attended this convention from all villages

⁵⁷ *Patta* or proof of ownership is the primary document that establishes legal ownership of land or property.

⁵⁸ Nitai Das, Interview in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 225.

⁵⁹ Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics*, 175; Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 162.

⁶⁰ *Deshabrati* (October 5, 1967) in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 1, 83-84.

⁶¹ *Deshabrati* (November 30, 1967) in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 84- 85.

in the area and pledged to end exploitation by treading the path of freedom as exemplified by Naxalbari. Around 10,000 tribals attended the meeting with bows and arrows suspecting armed action by jotedars. The convention was chaired by peasant leaders Bijoy Das, Bhabadeb Mandal and Gunadhar Murmu. It must be noted that the local peasant leadership in Debra, though members of CPI(M), had professed their support to Naxalbari. Bhabadeb Mondal talked about following the path of armed struggle against exploitation and building up of a revolutionary organisation. Murmu in his speech reminded the peasants that the time for harvesting had arrived and this was the time for building up the resistance against jotedars and their attempts to deprive them of the fruits of hard labour. The meeting gave a call to capture all produce of benami lands and sharecroppers were advised to retain their produce. Also, all those who had cultivated on vested lands of government, but their produce had been confiscated by the jotedars, were advised to take action.⁶² Just after the decision to forcibly harvest crops and capturing harvests were made, the jotedars went on the defensive and armed action by the jotedars were reported in Nandigram, Salboni and Keshpur, where three peasants were killed.⁶³ Due to such resistance tendencies, more than five police camps had been set up in Debra and Section 144 of Indian Penal Code⁶⁴ was also imposed. This resulted in arrests of many activists and common peasants participating in the movement, under Preventive Detention Act.⁶⁵ Despite arrests and legal actions, peasant activism continued unabated even in 1968. March 1968 saw a series of meetings, peasant conventions and rallies in different villages of Debra *thana* area. The nature of the movement shifted from harvesting movement to demands for land

⁶² *Deshabrati* (December 7, 1967), in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 85-86

⁶³ For details see *Deshabrati* (December 14, 1967), in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 87-88

⁶⁴ Section 144 of Indian Penal Code deals with laws punishing 'unlawful assembly'. Unlawful Assembly is defined by Section 141 of IPC as assembly of five or more persons having a 'common object' to perform an omission or offence. 'Common object' i.e. common objective refers to five activities considered illegal: 'to overawe Government by criminal force', 'to resist the execution of law or legal process', 'to commit an offence', 'forcible possession or dispossession of any property' or 'to compel any person to do illegal acts. The section gives power to a District Magistrate, a Subdivisional Magistrate or any other Executive Magistrate specially empowered by the state government in this behalf, to issue orders in the case where he has sufficient ground to take action regarding prevention of or remedy to any situation that threaten peace and tranquillity of society.

⁶⁵ Preventive detention is when a person is held in police custody only on the basis of a suspicion that they would conduct a criminal act or cause harm to society. The police have the authority to hold anyone they suspect of committing a criminal offence. The police have the ability to make arrests without a warrant or a magistrate's authorization in certain cases. 'Preventive detention' is also referred to as 'administrative detention', since this detention is directed by the executive and the decision-making authority lies exclusively upon the administrative authority. The first Preventive Detention Act was passed on 26 February 1950, with a purpose to prevent 'anti-national elements' from carrying out acts that are hostile to Nation's security and defence. This Act was repealed in 1971. Other Acts passed from time to time are the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) which was first passed in 1967, the 1971 Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), Foreign Exchange and Prevention of Smuggling Activities Act, COFEPOSA (1974), Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, TADA, of 1985 and Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) of 2002.

acquisition. On 30th and 31st March, 1968 sharecroppers and peasants jointly decided in a meeting at Shal Dahari village, that all benami and vested lands need to be captured and on 3rd April a public deputation was given to the BDO by the peasant representatives of the region, followed by a rally. Multiple demands were voiced like no eviction from benami *bhag* and residential (*vastu*) lands, distribution of *khas* lands to agricultural labourers and landless, installation of tube wells in tribal areas and areas where labourers reside to ensure water supply and withdrawal of pending cases against peasants.⁶⁶ Similar activism was noted in May 1968 as well. On May 16, 1968 a public meeting was organised where Bhabadeb Mandal appealed to the crowd to capture *khas* lands and lands under sharecropping. Creation of militant base areas in villages to carry out such actions was also emphasised.⁶⁷ On May 20, 1968, the BDO of Kharagpur was *gheraoed* by a thousand people led by Bhabadeb Mondal, Gunadhar Murmu and others demanding actions on questions of land redistribution.⁶⁸ Throughout 1968 activities were noted in other areas as well like Salboni and Chandrakona. Disturbances were common in the entire area during the harvesting season i.e. November-December, 1968 which involved forcible harvesting and confiscation, clashes between peasants and the armed agents of jotedars resulting in deaths.

Apart from such mass-based strategy, another type of activity was noticed in Debra during 1967. Student and youth activists organised 'Red Guard'⁶⁹ campaigns and the main participants were from the cities and towns. Youths from Calcutta were active in organising actions in the region. Though not politically very well equipped, the youths throughout 1968 and early 1969 had a favourable impact on the mind of the peasantry there. Ranabir Samaddar in one interview mentions such Red Guard campaigns,

We had to go in groups to villages for about a week or for daily visits to villages near the city... which used to be called "Red Guard" action. My first introduction to Bengal's villages was in this way – in Kalikapur, in 1967-68. The place was not like it is now. One only saw dim lights beyond Jadavpur – in Santoshpur and other areas. The gleaming Bypass beyond that was not there. Later, I also went in a small group, together with some other

⁶⁶ *Deshabrati* (April 11, 1968) in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 92-93

⁶⁷ *Deshabrati*, 23rd May, 1968 in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 96

⁶⁸ *Deshabrati*, May 23, 1968 in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 95

⁶⁹ Red Guards were students formed into paramilitary units as part of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in Mao's China. They were formed under the banner of Chinese Communist Party in 1966, wore green jackets and red arm bands and were crusaders in Mao's mission to purge 'revisionism' and to rid party of elements not considered adequately 'revolutionary'. They engaged in marches, meetings, propaganda, attacked and even persecuted local party leaders, teachers and intellectuals who conformed to beliefs not exactly in line with Mao's thoughts. As actions turned violent, anarchical and spiralled out of control the Chinese army phased out the Red Guards by 1968. Such actions in China by students inspired similar activism in India as propagated by Charu Mazumdar, the star ideologue of Naxalism of that period.

colleagues, to Debra as part of the “Red Guard” campaign. Then, of course, about a year later, I went to Debra, but this time not for just a week. I was placed there as part of organisational work.⁷⁰

In another interview, he mentioned his first introduction to Debra as a part of exercise to know about villages, its people, crops, soil, problems etc. Red guard campaign was the attempt of student-youths to understand the countryside.⁷¹

However, as time progressed state repression made public activities difficult. Many of the leading activists including Mandal and Murmu were arrested under Preventive Detention Act and many others had to go into hiding. Such situation led to the shift to the annihilation line. The Report of Revolutionary Armed Peasant Struggle in Debra (West Bengal), 1969 stated the reason for the transition in the following words,

A stage was reached during the 1967 movement when the annihilation of the class enemy and building a base area came up as an inescapable task. But open propaganda can never become the basis of a secret Party unit. So, the organisation became helpless before the onslaught of the government and jotedars. When police repression began and Section 144 was promulgated, there was no way to carry forward the movement other than by means of guerrilla activity, by forming secret squads and annihilating the class enemies...⁷²

The Report further stated the dual burden on the peasants,

The peasants were burdened with hundreds of court cases ... the agricultural labourers and sharecroppers began fighting two kinds of battle against the jotedars- putting up armed resistance and fighting legal battles in law-courts. These two kinds of battle are mutually exclusive and cannot be carried on simultaneously for long...⁷³

The movement in such circumstances needed a new direction. News of struggles in Srikakulam, Mushahari, work of building a new party and organisational activity in the Gopiballavpur area inspired the new line of struggle by forming guerrilla units and pursuing the annihilation line.

Gunadhar Murmu and Bhabadeb Mandal sum up the various activities that characterised the pre-annihilation (1967-68) phase as follows,

⁷⁰ Ranabir Samaddar, “Naxalbari and Popular Movements: A Conversation with Ranabir Samaddar”, Interview by Samata Biswas and Sandip Bandyopadhyay on behalf of the Calcutta Research Group, 2018, accessed on May 10, 2024, http://www.mcrg.ac.in/Chair_Professor/Samaddar_Interview.pdf.

⁷¹ Samaddar, ‘Amar Dekha Debra’, Interview in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 237

⁷² Debra Thana Organizing Committee, CPI (M-L), “Revolutionary Armed Peasant Struggle in Debra (West Bengal)”, 265

⁷³ Debra Thana Organizing Committee, CPI (M-L), “Revolutionary Armed Peasant Struggle in Debra (West Bengal)”, 266

1. Under the leadership of the communist cadres and the Peasant Samiti re-occupation of land started on a broad scale. Large scale confiscation of benami land, khas land and land possessed by absentee zamindars, and seizure of paddy started... the Peasant Samiti could not advance the programme of confiscation of all lands belonging to the zamindars and jotedars. That is why the mass mobilisation of the peasants could not become a permanent feature, the programme was not based on the slogan, "Land to the tillers."
2. ...the Peasant Samiti issued the slogan, "stop black -marketing of rice". All the bazars of the station were crowded with demonstrations by excited and armed peasantry... Eight to ten thousand peasants started mobilizing in a single demonstration.
3. With this the movement for higher wages started... Debra has many agricultural labourers. They raised a demand for a fair wage... the jotedars tried to stop the peasant movement with guns. On one side were the peasants armed with arrows and spears, and on the other side were the concerned jotedars with their guns, these open struggles strengthened the peasants,
4. Through this movement the Party and the Peasant Samiti acquired another gain – class unity. The Tribal Bengali, the poor peasant labourers started uniting, trained cadres started emerging from amongst the middle peasants, and the rich peasants thought it better not to be open enemies. The organisers of the Samities acquired the knowledge that the movement itself brings unity. The black-smiths, the boatmen of Kheyapar, petty shopkeepers, all started mobilising under the banner of Peasant Samiti.⁷⁴

Pre-Annihilation Phase: Gopiballavpur

In Debra, the background to peasant mobilisation existed due to CPI base followed by CPI (M) and Krishak Sabha activities. However, Gopiballavpur did not have much communist influence in the 1960s. The main party in opposition to the Congress was the Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party which later was Praja Socialist Party and Socialist Party. The Socialists had tried to initiate some land related movements in the neighbouring Jhargram *thana* area but there was no such activity in the Gopiballavpur area. Also, a comprehensive anti -feudal programme was absent and their leaders had some connections with the jotedar-mahajan class. In 1964 after the CPI split, the major section of leadership in Midnapore district had remained in CPI and a small portion had joined the CPI (M), which included the Debra leadership. In the Gopiballavpur area, the communist organisation was quite weak. The entire Left organisation hence was the handiwork of a select few student-youth who had come under communist influence in the cities. The primary initiator of Left mobilisation in the area was Santosh Rana of Dharampur village who went for higher studies in Calcutta, came in contact with the student movement there, became indoctrinated with Marxist ideas and after Naxalbari left his research at Rajabazar Science College and went back to his village in December 1967.

⁷⁴ Gunadhar Murmu, Bhabadeb Mandal, "An Analysis of the Debra Peasant Movement", 738-739.

Rana's decision to join the Naxalite movement full time was the result of his visits to a few villages during the Durga puja recess of September, 1967. This was in line with Mazumdar's instructions that the youth should visit villages during academic breaks to understand the agrarian situation and develop class understanding. Given the poor communication system in those days, the news of Naxalbari had not travelled in an extensive manner in this region. Rana along with three of his friends from Calcutta (Y.M Rao and T. Vijayendra of Rajabazar Science College to name two out of three) visited three villages named Bhola, Asui and Bakra and conducted meetings sensitising people about the Naxalbari struggle. In Bhola, the meeting was held in the locality of the Mal community who were quite inspired and excited by the strategy of land acquisition from the jotedars. Three youths, who displayed the greatest enthusiasm were Tarakeshwar Dandapat, Amulya Kalapahar and Bankim Nayek. They played central role during the upsurge in the area. In Asui, the maximum number of families belonged to Bagdi, Munda and Lohar communities but during the meeting on the issue of land acquisition, the nature of enthusiasm was different from the Mals of Bhola. In the meeting at Bakra, even the rich peasants and jotedars had attended the meeting where they had raised questions but the poor-exploited few, who attended the meeting had remained silent. This experience combined with the formation of AICCCR was the final trigger for Rana to move back to his village as a full-time organiser on individual initiative.⁷⁵

Others from Presidency Consolidation and Calcutta arrived later in March, 1968. The decision to go to the Midnapore frontier zone was taken by leaders of the Consolidation after consultation with Mazumdar and Sushital Roy Chowdhury. Initially the Consolidation had planned to go to Cooch Behar, Sundarbans or Murshidabad. As, Chatterjee notes in his memoir, Mazumdar advised them not to choose any of the three. Cooch Behar, according to him, was within the range of expansion of Naxalbari comrades. The status of Sundarbans and East Pakistan border as an underdeveloped frontier area was favourable but the selection of the location should preferably be such that the struggle can spread to central and south India. In Mazumdar's opinion the area selected should have the features of feudalistic exploitation and sharp class contradiction between poor peasant and labourers on one hand and the feudal element on the other. Sushital Roy Chowdhury however had some scepticism about the student-youths directly going to the villages and instead advised to gather experience by staying amongst labourers in labour localities and working in labour organisations in the urban areas

⁷⁵ Rana, *Rajniti*, 2017, 105-111.

before going to the villages. A meeting of the Consolidation members was held on December 28, 1967 where members were asked to research on probable areas of action and return with suggestions in the next meeting to be held on January 28, 1967. It was in this period that news of Gopiballavpur reached the Consolidation via Rao and Vijayendra. Its location in the tri-junction border along with its proximity to central India met the requirement suggested by Mazumdar. Also, its proximity to Debra which has a legacy of agrarian struggles and the nature of feudal relations in the frontier itself satisfied the second requirement of Mazumdar. Santosh Rana attended the meeting of the Consolidation on January 28, 1967 and the interaction resulted in the decision of the Consolidation to reach Gopiballavpur on March 3, 1968. The first four to reach there were Ashok Sengupta and Ashim Chatterjee of Presidency College, Kamal Chatterjee of Maulana Azad College and Ashim Mitra of Bagbazar area, Calcutta⁷⁶. Many others followed later.

It must be noted in this connection that not all the student-youth participants who arrived from Calcutta stayed back. Only a select few who could endure the harsh climate and hardships of rural life stayed back to build the organisation.

Various strategies of mobilisation were followed by Rana and his local aides like Amulya Kalapahar, Bankim Nayek, Pradip Singha, Himangshu Kar and others. Rana taught Physics at Nayabasan High School during the day and conducted meetings in different villages at night. The entire mobilisation was based on personal connections supplemented by caste-tribe i.e. community connections. The first organised activity was the local movement in April 1968 to increase wages for the labour working in unmetalled road repair project between Nayabasan and Gopiballavpur. The labour working mainly were Bagdis and a few Khandayets. The wage rate (1 rupee for every 100 cubic feet) being paid for the job did not even cover the price of 1 kg of rice in the area. A procession of 200 people was organised and slogans on wage increase and Naxalbari was raised, which was unprecedented in the area.⁷⁷ The success of this movement to increase wages increased the popularity of this group.

⁷⁶ See Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 125-129 for detailed account. It may be noted here that all activists who came in from outside had a pseudonym or alias in the area. Ashim Chattopadhyay, known during Presidency Days as Kaka, was known by the name of Bhaiya Das in the region. Ashok Sengupta was known as Gora Das, Kamal Chatterjee as Nimai. Prithiwaranjan Dasgupta was known by the names of Meghnad and Kalachand, Pradip Banerjee as Ramesh and Ranabir Samaddar as Ajoy.

⁷⁷ Rana, *Rajniti*, 115-116; Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 143.

On May 1, 1968 May Day was celebrated in the area. A rally taken out from Pitanaui village which passing through the villages of Rangiam, Salgeria, Parulia, Dhukundi, Mohulbani, Asui, Dharampur finally converged at Nayabasan. The small rally at the beginning had transformed into a mass gathering by the end. Chatterjee addressed the people along with local CPI leader, Gobinda Maity.⁷⁸

It was after this that contact was established between Rana and Deben Nayek of Surmuhi village, Baharagora, resulting in unification of struggle across Bengal -Bihar frontier. In Baharagora the main point of contact established via Deben Nayek was with Moni Chakraborty. He originally belonged to Basirhat from where he had fled during the Tebhaga movement under murder charges and had taken refuge in the house of a CPI supporter named Jyotirmoy Pal, a teacher in the Baharagora region. Over time he became a part of the family and the pivot of communist movement in the region. He used to propagate the views and programmes of the party moving from one village to another and in public places like the *haats* etc. CPI had recognised his contribution to the party and he had contested a number of times in the Baharagora - Chakulia Legislative Assembly seat. Though he did not win, he was quite popular in the area due to propaganda work and associated activities, With the CPI-CPI (M) split in 1964, he joined the latter. After Naxalbari, the CPI (M) support base of the area under his leadership sided with the Naxalbari line. He was aided in mobilisation activities by Malay Deb of Cooch Behar.⁷⁹

In Baharagora annihilation had already taken place as early as 1966. This was the result of clashes between the Mals of Surmuhi and its surrounding Mal villages with the Sadgops of neighbouring Barasol village. A group of youths under the leadership of Deben Nayek murdered the Sadgop jotedar, Jamini Ghosh, thereby creating a legacy of squad action much before the propagation of annihilation line by the Presidency Consolidation members and CPI (M-L) in the region. Surmuhi, because of this legacy, became the central organisational point of the BBOBRC in 1969.

Because of this networking and preliminary activities, Rana was perceived as a potential threat leading to his arrest on May 30, 1968. His arrest created quite a stir in the region given his popularity both as a teacher and a sympathiser. Protestors even organised a rally in

⁷⁸ Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 156-157; Rana, *Rajniti*, 116.

⁷⁹ Rana, *Rajniti*, 117; Susanta Jha, "Simanta Obhuthan o Baharagora Sangram", in *Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora'r Krishak Bidroho*, 13-14.

Gopiballavpur demanding release of Rana as well as other political prisoners.⁸⁰ It must be noted in this context that the state had come under President's rule on February 20, 1968 which lasted for a year. With the formation of the second United Front government, the political prisoners were released as a part of election promise. Rana was released on February 28, 1969 and by that time news of formation of a new party was already in the air. During the absence of Rana, the task of building organisation in the area was done by Prithwiranjan Dasgupta (Meghnad).⁸¹ With Bhola village as base, he carried out networking in the surrounding Mal and tribal villages amidst intense hardship. Regarding mobilisation of the tribals, two locals Tharpa Mandi and Lebachand Tudu played a leading role. Simple incidents in the region had increased the popularity of the activists among the tribals. Rana in his memoir notes one such incident.

On the question of mobilisation initiatives among the tribals, Rana notes an interesting incident. One tribal person of the Munda locality near Pitanaui named Dakdahi had failed to repay loan to the mahajan in the area, Debendra Rana (relative of Santosh Rana himself). As a result, the *muliya* working in the house of Rana, Durga Khamrai had on instruction of his owner, confiscated the cow and plough of the defaulter and on his way back crossed paths with Santosh and Mihir Rana. The Rana brothers returned the confiscated property to the Munda locality and told the people there not to repay any more loans to the mahajan. Accounts of this incident spread very fast in the locality and this single incident, according to Rana, had more effect in mobilisation than distribution of loads of leaflets. The people came to believe that this new group in the area truly wanted to take action against the exploiters.⁸² Gaining confidence among the tribal populace was helpful for the next phase of fight, as given the location of their villages, access to hideouts during guerrilla action and police combing operations was ensured.

⁸⁰ *Deshabrati* (June 13, 1968) in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 97-98.

⁸¹ Born in 1945, he hails from Taltala area in Calcutta. He was as a student of Surendranath College and like the others was inspired by the prevailing revolutionary climate of the 1950s and 1960s. He had left Calcutta for Durgapur when the government crackdown on the communists happened. He became acquainted with the politics of CPI (M) through his brother Ashish Dasgupta who was killed in 1966 in Durgapur during the upsurge created by food movement and steel plant union activities. An interesting personal observation regarding the final impetus to be an activist was noted in the interview. His father had to get his majority of his teeth removed due to medical reasons. Food crisis was looming large and *rotis* had become the staple food at home. The scene that shook him was that of his father trying to mash *rotis* (Indian bread) into a bowl of *dal* (pulses) so that he could at least try to eat. This scene along with his mother's reaction of helplessness made him realize the need for change. He states that there have been other incidents but this triggered his sensitivities. He officially joined CPI(M) in its Taltala unit in 1966 and got involved in preliminary party works like circulation of pamphlets, putting up posters on walls etc. After Naxalbari, he changed his affiliation. 12-13 members of the Taltala branch supported the Naxalbari line. He was part of them. Excerpt from the interview of Dasgupta by author (Jhargram, March 10, 2021).

⁸² Rana, *Rajniti*, 140-144.

On March 6, 1969 a meeting of the frontier comrades took place in the house of Sundar Hansda in Kondor Village. Discussions were held on the question of joining the AICCCR and the decision to join the new party, as and when it is officially formed, was finalised.⁸³ The Presidency Consolidation members had not joined AICCCR but this time Chatterjee was also in favour of it. Chatterjee in his memoir notes that debate had taken place in a meeting with the Debra leaders of the Midnapore Coordination Committee regarding joining the AICCCR and they had opposed Chatterjee's proposal to dissolve the Coordination Committee to join the AICCCR.⁸⁴ However, both the groups joined AICCCR shortly.

Formation of CPI (M-L) was declared to the public on May 1, 1969 and on the same day a meeting was held in Gopiballavpur. The nature of this meeting was different from the meetings held earlier as it was held in the jungle area between Bhola and Pitana villages and a gathering of about two hundred men and women was addressed by Rana and Dasgupta.⁸⁵ The pledge to build struggle in the region along the Naxalbari line was taken. The next landmark in the area was the formation of the BBOBRC. Meeting of the frontier and the Debra activists were held at the house of Deben Nayek in Surmuhi on August 21, 1969. In this meeting Sushital Roy Chowdhury, the state secretary of CPI (M-L) was also present. The BBOBRC formation was formally announced and the strategy outlined. It was decided that the new phase of struggle would begin in September with the strategy of annihilation and confiscation of fire-arms, for which armed squads of youths have to be build up in all the areas. The squads would work with conventional weapons like bows and arrows, *tangis* etc. for the time being. With the help of the peasants, the squads would investigate and collect information on the most notorious jotedar or mahajan in the area. Surveillance had to be set up to note the time and place where the class enemy was least secure and use that opportunity for annihilation. Right identification of the class enemy would increase the popularity of the party and the poor affiliated to other Left parties would also shift allegiance to the new party. In each village a pivot leader would coordinate communication across all levels like party, squad and general public. After an annihilation happens, the reaction was to be noted for further planning. Due to such actions, class enemies would flee from the area which in turn would increase enthusiasm among the peasants and create conditions for establishment of liberated zone or a base area. Such areas would multiply, which along with the creation of a Red Army, would lead to liberation. Surmuhi

⁸³ Rana, *Rajniti*, 135.

⁸⁴ Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 167-168.

⁸⁵ Prithwirajan Dasgupta, interviewed by the author (Jhargram: August 17, 2021).

was selected as the regional headquarter of this committee and the central coordinators were Ashim Chatterjee, Moni Chakraborty, Bhabadeb Mandal, Deben Nayek. Bhabadeb Mandal was selected as the Convenor of the frontier committee. However, at the party conference of the regional committee in Digha in January 1970, the committee was reconstituted with Chatterjee as the secretary.⁸⁶ This reconstitution can also be interpreted in the line of sole importance accorded to annihilation campaign which Mandal was not agreeing to.

The Annihilation Phase – I

The first action was attempted on August 15, 1969 in Dharampur against a rich businessman of the Teli community, Moti Pal. A squad of four had attacked his house with *tangis* but Pal had managed to escape, though critically injured. The incident had an adverse effect. The nature of the action induced terror in the minds of the people and the same people who provided food and shelter to the activists refused to maintain contacts any further in the village.⁸⁷ On September 1, 1969 another failed attempt to attack a group of businessmen were made which resulted in injury of Pradip Banerjee due to a shotgun misfire. The first successful action by a squad of 30 took place on September 26, 1969 against two moneylenders named Nagen Senapati and Bhupen Senapati (Teli). Bhupen died on the same day while Nagen, who was injured in this act, was murdered by a squad later in 1970. All mortgaged items like gold and silver jewellery, land papers along with a gun was confiscated. As an effect of this action, another jotedar-mahajan of the area having 300 bighas of property had pleaded for life in exchange for surrendering all his property.⁸⁸ The next action took place on September 27, 1969 in Surmuhi, Baharagora in which the house of Baishnab Ghosh was attacked. His brother Jamini Ghosh was murdered in 1966 by a squad led by Deben Nayek, as mentioned earlier. Ghosh managed to flee but his entire property which included around 200 bighas of land, rice godown, grocery and garments shop and all mortgaged property was confiscated.⁸⁹

The intensity and scale of this action triggered response both from the jotedars and the administration. Though many of them fled, attempt to unify in counteraction was in place. The

⁸⁶ Rana, *Rajniti*, 139-141; Susanta Jha, "Simanta Obhuthan o Baharagora Sangram", in *Debra – Gopiballavpur – Baharagora'r Krishak Bidroho*, 16-17; Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 173-174.

⁸⁷ Rana, *Rajniti*, 144-145

⁸⁸ *Deshabrati* (October 9, 1969), in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 125-126.

⁸⁹ *Deshabrati*, October 9, 1969 in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 126-129; Rana, *Rajniti*, 158. The dates in Rana's account and *Deshabrati* do not match. In Rana and Chattopadhyay's account, Senapati action is dated 27th September and Surmuhi 28th, while *Deshabrati* notes it as 26th and 27th September respectively.

Bihar Military Police (BMP) moved into the area and amidst police atrocities not just the activists but also the people had to flee leaving their homes and possessions behind.

A report of the BBOBRC noted that a contingent of about 400 men of the Bihar Military Police was responsible for the repression in Baharagora- Chakulia area. The report stated,

Encircled by the sudden and all -out attack, our guerrilla bands lost their initiative and became inactive. We did not have a thorough idea of how to restore the initiative of the guerrilla bands by quickly changing localities and judicious application of flexibility. As a result, the guerrilla bands were unable to maintain contact with one another and became separated, and the struggle in Baharagorah as a whole received a severe jolt.⁹⁰

A pamphlet circulated by the Baharagora Regional Organizing Committee of the CPI (M-L), while stating the nature of police atrocities in Baharagora, Chakulia on the toiling classes and how the Surmuhi region has turned into a graveyard, reiterated that the guerrilla path of annihilating the class enemies was the only mode of survival, the other path being that of slavery. Living in peace with the rich was stated as a mere utopia. The struggle in Surmuhi was between the rich and poor, irrespective of caste and religion. The middle peasant – middle class was emphatically declared as an ally except those who acted as agents of the oppressors. On the use of the tag ‘dacoits’, the pamphlet read as follows,

The struggle/ resistance of the poor means dacoity to you. How did you yourself assimilate a mountain of wealth? have you ever toiled to produce a single paddy? The incident at Surmuhi may be dacoity to you but for us it is the fulfilment of a long due wish. It is a festival for us. May this festival spread all throughout Baharagora and India.

The committee gave out the clarion call to organise into guerrilla units, get armed, annihilate class enemies and avenge police atrocities.⁹¹

The next action in this series was noted in Debra on October 1, 1969. As the Debra Committee Report notes, the question of strategy for action was discussed in detail before execution. Two alternatives were considered. The first one was to mobilise armed people to raid the house of the jotedar. The guerrillas would finish their job of annihilation when the raiding people would indulge in confiscation and seizure of hoarded rice stocks. In the second alternative, the

⁹⁰ BBOBRC, “Report on Armed Peasant Struggle in Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border Region”, *The Historic Turning Point: A Liberation Anthology*, Vol II, ed. Suniti K. Ghosh (Calcutta: 1993), 325. The Report originally in Bengali appeared in *Deshabrati* (April 23, 1970).

⁹¹ Baharagora Regional Organizing Committee, CPI (M-L), “Srenishotrur Rokte Lekha Ekkhani Biplabi Istehar” (A Manifesto Written with Blood of The Class Enemies’), in *Lal Tamsuk: Naxalbari Andoloner Pramanyo Tathya Sankalan*, ed. Amar Bhattacharya (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2021), 185-189. Originally published in *Deshabrati* (November 20, 1969).

guerrilla unit was to make thorough investigation and annihilate the jotedar at an opportune moment. The first alternative was chosen in which masses were to be rallied in support of the squad. On October 1, a demonstration of about a thousand-armed (*Deshabrati*, October 9, 1969 mentions 2000) peasants attacked the house of Kanai Kuity in Shal Dahari village. Kuity escaped (Rana in his account however mentions that Kuity was killed)⁹² but all stocks of hoarded rice, clothes and mortgaged items, gun and cartridges were seized and land documents burned.⁹³ Thus, this was not just a guerrilla action but a mass one on the jotedar, keeping in line with the Debra tradition of favouring mass mobilisation. October saw three more annihilations in Debra - Jiban Das on October 13, Dwija Roy who was killed during action by his own house help named Ganesh Murmu⁹⁴ on October 18 and Satish Poray on October 23.⁹⁵

While such activities were already in motion in the area, a report in *The Statesman* on October 10, 1969 can be noted here especially because of its presentation. The report went on to note that recent intelligence reports had alerted the government regarding some CPI (M-L) 'elements' from Calcutta who were active in Debra and Gopiballavpur and were working among the tribal communities, trying to instigate attacks on the jotedar. A Home department official had stated that these 'elements' were no real threat to law-and-order problems in the area. But lawlessness indulged in by even 'romantically revolutionary' elements needed to be dealt with and planning for police camps was being made in the area and joint action with Bihar police was already in place resulting in arrests and many Naxals fleeing into jungles of Bihar. The report went on to state that though the CPI (M-L) journal *Deshabrati* claimed spread of armed revolutionary peasant battle in the area, the West Bengal police were convinced that these incidents were just armed dacoities.⁹⁶ However existence of counter-narratives hint at a possible downplaying of the activities due to political reasons. This can be gauged from newspaper reports on administrative action. One report on October 20, 1969 stated that the District Magistrate of Midnapore, B.R Chakraborty along other senior officials had to personally visit Debra to stop the area from going out of control.⁹⁷ Another report noted that the decision of the government to set up three more police camps in Gopiballavpur along the

⁹² Rana, *Rajniti*, 156.

⁹³ Debra Thana Organizing Committee, CPI (M-L), "Revolutionary Armed Peasant Struggle in Debra (West Bengal)", 267-268.

⁹⁴ Shakti Mondal, "Amar Shomoyer Debra", 212.

⁹⁵ *Deshabrati* (October 30, 1969) in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 132-134.

⁹⁶ *The Statesman*, October 10, 1969.

⁹⁷ *The Statesman*, October 21, 1969.

Bihar border on November 3, 1969.⁹⁸ The fact that the entire tri-junction area was in turmoil is evident from another report which noted that Naxalite activity extending over 50 miles on the border areas of Mayurbhanj-Midnapore district and 150 miles on the border areas of Mayurbhanj and Baharagora had become quite serious. The complicated topography of the area had made such movements easier. As a response border patrol of the Orissa border police were put in place to prevent infiltrations of Naxalites from Bihar and West Bengal.⁹⁹

Two more murders were carried out on November 10 in Debra, both rich peasants and collaborators of police in curbing Naxal activities. Another murder was noted in Gopiballavpur. With the commencement of police actions, the strategy had changed. Day operations were replaced by late night ones. There was no raising of slogans or confiscation of property as earlier.¹⁰⁰

This first wave of annihilation phase had created a power vacuum in the area. Either the jotedars had fled or had surrendered. This had resulted in a confidence boost among the common people. The Naxalite leaders were being arrested. For instance, Ranabir Samaddar and Nitai Das, two important faces in the Debra region, were arrested on November 12, 1969.¹⁰¹ Santosh Rana and Mihir Rana of Gopiballavpur had absconded from the area. However, these developments did not prevent ushering in of the harvesting movement of November -December, 1969, which was quite successful in the area in terms of enthusiasm and participation.

The Mass Movement Phase in Gopiballavpur: Paddy Harvesting Movement or the *Dhan Katar Andolan*

This short phase around November – December 1969 was marked by forcible harvesting of paddy from the fields of the jotedars. It was this resistance that had the possibility of turning into a mass movement thereby alarming the authorities. It must be noted that forcible harvesting was not unique to Gopiballavpur alone in this period, Newspapers like *Anandabazar Patrika* of the period November -December 1969 is replete with news items of forcible harvesting or

⁹⁸ *The Statesman*, November 4, 1969.

⁹⁹ *The Statesman*, October 20, 1969.

¹⁰⁰ *The Statesman*, November 11, 1969.

¹⁰¹ *The Statesman*, "Calcutta Student Held at Debra", November 14, 1969; *The Statesman*, "Three More Police Camps in Gopiballavpur", November 4, 1969.

dhan loot in different areas apart from Midnapore like Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, Basirhat, Baharampur, across South 24 Parganas in Canning, Kakdwip, Diamond Harbour etc.¹⁰²

The state government was aware of the problems that may arise regarding law-and-order maintenance during the harvesting season. The Land Revenue Department under Harekrishna Konar issued a circular on October 13, 1969 to their officers in various districts to visit vulnerable areas and prepare lists of people who have actually cultivated lands as chances of disputes over crop possession was high. Krishak Sabha volunteers were also asked to keep night long vigils on lands as soon as the paddy began ripening.¹⁰³ Konar in a broadcast over the All India Radio announced that the tiller would have the right to harvest the crop grown in *khas* or recovered benami land but law and order was to be maintained. Not less than 80000 bighas of land illegally retained by jotedars had been redistributed to the landless and this harvesting season therefore had kindled new hope. About 400,000 to 500,000 maunds of paddy which would have gone into the hordes of jotedars would now enter the peasant's home. The jotedars who had lost those lands would not accept it easily and hence the question of harvesting and protection of crops had become important. He went on to state that it was the policy of the United Front that in the clash between jotedar and peasant, the government machinery would side with the peasant.¹⁰⁴ Such words were bound to embolden the peasants into action and this was not to be limited to the redistributed benami lands.

In a meeting with the District Magistrates and Police Superintendents at the Writers Building on November 12, 1969, instructions were given regarding the course of action to be taken. If necessary, a meeting was to be immediately held with Party representatives at the district and Subdivisional levels. The guns of jotedars were to be seized but their security was also to be ensured. If there was a possibility of disturbance by rallies and demonstrations by armed peasants, it was to be stopped immediately. The district administration was to mediate if disputes arose between parties regarding harvesting and only extremely critical or sensitive

¹⁰² For instance *Anandabazar Patrika* dated November 17, 1969 carried a detailed news item titled 'Harvesting Resistance: In three days 2 killed and 80 injured in 24 Parganas' (Dhankata birodh: 24 Parganay teen dine nihoto dui, ahoto ashi); *Anandabazar Patrika* of December 13, 1969 reported, 'Riots around harvesting: 4 killed, whole village in ashes' (Dhankata niye danga: Char jon khun, Gota gram bhoshibhuto'). *Anandabazar Patrika*, December 23, 1969, reported a total of 976 cases of *dhan loot* and pillage and 910 instances of threat and torture in Bengal. The highest number was noted in 24 parganas (446 and 307 each) followed by Midnapore (166 and 213 each); On December 26, 1969 the *Patrika* reported such struggles and firing in Hingalganj thana area, Basanti and *dhan loot* in Jangipara (Hooghly), New Barrackpore areas.

¹⁰³ *The Statesman*, October 11, 1969.

¹⁰⁴ *The Statesman*, November 19, 1969.

matters was to be brought to the ministry level. Deputy Chief Minister and Home Minister, Jyoti Basu stated that the administration must look into the interests of the poor masses. Those who had confiscated illegal lands and had cultivated on them, were entitled to its harvest. However, maintenance of order was the main priority.¹⁰⁵ All official instructions, policies and strategies however did not have much effect in checking radicalism across different areas of the state including Midnapore.

Keeping in line with government directives, the Midnapore district administration had circulated a pamphlet on October 10, 1969, appealing to the people to refrain from agitation. The pamphlet appealed to the people to maintain peace during the harvesting season. It was instructed that harvesting was to be done by those who had cultivated the paddy of that season. In case of any dispute regarding the status of the cultivator i.e. a dispute regarding who had cultivated a said land, the administration and local peasant samitis were to be consulted. The directive instructed everyone to maintain law and order. The signatories of this pamphlet were the District Magistrate, Additional District Magistrate and leaders of parties like Praja Socialist Party, SUC, Congress and CPI MLAs like Kanai Bhowmick and Deben Das. Such appeal was dubbed as revisionism and class compromise by the radicals, who called for boycott of such appeals.¹⁰⁶

This phase was initiated by the women of a Mal village named Mahipal, who forcibly harvested the half ripe paddy from the fields of a jotedar named Nalini Pal of Dharampur around mid - November, 1969. The people of the village claimed the land of Pal to be the common property of the village.¹⁰⁷ This initiative from the people inspired the activists in the area who decided to promote this line in the ongoing harvesting season of the *Aman* paddy. Different locations were selected and the information disbursed. Mihir Rana, Pradip Singh, Leba Tudu, Dipak Das, Tharpa Mandi, Amulya Kalapahar coordinated this activity in different areas. Forcible harvesting was carried out in Betkola (November 21), Shyamsundarpur (November 22) and Asui (November 23).

Such was the extent of rapid spread of this movement in different pockets of the district, to use *Anandabazar Patrika* statistics - 200 clashes in 2 weeks - that a high-level meeting was convened on November 28, 1969 at the Writers Building among the District Magistrate, B.

¹⁰⁵ *Anandabazar Patrika*, November 13, 1969.

¹⁰⁶ *Deshabrati* (December 4, 1969), in *Lal Tamsuk*, ed., Bhattacharya, 183-184.

¹⁰⁷ Rana, *Rajniti*, 161-162.

Chakraborty, Superintendent of Police, Rathin Bhattacharya and Jyoti Basu. The need for more police force was emphasised in the meeting to bring matters under control.¹⁰⁸ On December 6, 1969 opposition party leader Siddhartha Shankar Ray met Jyoti Basu and noted the existence of lawlessness in few areas of Midnapore. He had visited certain areas in Kharagpur and Jhargram Subdivision where people had complained that the harvest of landowners having lands in the range of 2 to 15 bighas were being confiscated by Communist party supporters, armed with bows and arrows.¹⁰⁹

In the harvesting movement the class configuration became clear as it was a determining factor in deciding whose crop was to be cut and whose to be spared. Chatterjee in his memoir has identified five classes in the area. Starting from the lowest rung in the economic hierarchy, they are,

- Agricultural labourers who did not have access to land of any kind with their livelihood depending on working in the land of others, thereby forming the most potent force in agrarian struggles.
- Poor peasants who had small plots of land incapable of providing subsistence, often resulting in them becoming sharecroppers in the lands of others and even labourers in other areas.
- Middle peasants who tilled their own lands.
- Rich peasants who worked in the fields themselves but given the size of holdings they employed labour during peak agricultural seasons like sowing and harvesting.
- Jotedars who did not work in their own lands and totally employed the labour of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers, and hence were the most exploitative force.

Apart from agricultural classes there were other classes that existed in the rural economy like potters (*kumor*), launderer (*dhobi*), barber (*napit*) etc. who in general could be considered as allies to the labourer-poor peasant-middle peasant axis. This analysis is helpful in grasping the nature of peasant initiative in terms of action they selected for specific plots of land. The lands of middle peasants were totally spared. In case of rich peasants, crop of one portion of the land was cut off. Sympathetic small jotedars were spared but in case of the oppressive big jotedars

¹⁰⁸ *Anandabazar Patrika*, November 29, 1969.

¹⁰⁹ Siddhartha Ray, 'Medinipurer kichu anchal'e aain nei', *Anandabazar Patrika*, December 7, 1969.

nothing was spared.¹¹⁰ Even Rana notes that the party adopted a policy whereby the paddy fields of the rich and the middle peasants were spared and they marked those fields with a broken *Sal* tree branch.¹¹¹ Regarding jotedars, *The Statesman* on December 13, 1969 noted an observation in one report,

In certain areas, jotedars had avoided forcible harvesting by paying protection money. Once this money was paid, a broken branch of a tree was stuck in the jotedar's plot to indicate that his paddy should be spared. We saw ample proof of this in the fields. . . Naxalites still control over 20 villages in the forests along the Bihar and Orissa borders. That no policeman will enter the affected areas without an armed escort became apparent during our tour of the fringe of the Naxalite controlled pockets.¹¹²

The maximum turnout in this harvesting movement happened in Gopiballavpur and Bargidanga *mouzas* in which thousands of people had turned up. The police, though present in the area, did not block the harvesting. Rana notes that it was known later that the police had been instructed by the government not to take action unless any police station was directly attacked.¹¹³ Leba Tudu in course of an interview noted,

The 1969 paddy harvesting /dhan kata movement was a festival in itself. The local people themselves initiated and directed such actions. Only 5-6 activists had managed to arouse 30-40 thousand people, an unprecedented incident in the area and beyond expectations...

For 7 days around November -December 1969 at the time of harvesting of the *Aman* paddy, the control of the area had passed into the hands of the locals. The villagers and farmers were in a position to set prices of items in the villages and decide what was to be sold in the market. Tudu comments that such was the situation that 'it felt like even the trees and stones had turned Naxal'. It was after this that police action by EFR and CRP began at its earnest...

Such was the scale that many zamindars voluntarily surrendered. The initial progress of the movement was slow but with the success of the paddy harvests and return of mortgage property, the movement accelerated...¹¹⁴

The police had not been able to prevent the forcible harvesting. In end November, a special conference was convened in the deputy Chief Minister's room in the Writers Building which was attended by the District Magistrate of Midnapore, Police Superintendent, D.I.G (I.B.), the acting Inspector General of Police and the Home Secretary. Activities at Gopiballavpur was the

¹¹⁰ Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 179-180; *Deshabrati* (December 11, 1969) in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 146. This particular issue of *Deshabrati* has accounts of *dhaan loot* till November 29, 1969.

¹¹¹ Rana, *Rajniti*, 163.

¹¹² *The Statesman*, December 13, 1969.

¹¹³ Rana, *Rajniti*, 166.

¹¹⁴ Leba Chand Tudu, "Aitihashik Gopiballavpur, Aitihashik Rupsikundi" (Historic Gopiballavpur, Historic Rupsikundi), interview by Amar Bhattacharya, in *Lal Tamsuk*, 261-264. Interview transcript by Bhattacharya in Bengali, translated here by author.

highlight of the meeting. With five police camps already in place, ‘activization of the existing police force’ in the area was proposed. Improvement of police functioning was to be ensured, if necessary, by replacing existing ineffective officials.¹¹⁵ By the end of November 1969, one company of Eastern Frontier Rifles (EFR) was deployed in Gopiballavpur for ‘mopping up’ operations against CPI (M-L) workers and the ‘ring leaders’ who were still absconding.¹¹⁶ Despite such actions, the administration failed to stop harvesting and even in the first week of December they were forced to remain spectators when a large mob harvested paddy near Gopiballavpur.¹¹⁷ A report in *The Statesman* on December 7, 1969 noted that the Naxalites had so far forcibly harvested paddy from 200 to 300 acres of land in Gopiballavpur area and their strategy was to gather 3000 to 4000 armed people in an area and take away the paddy grown there.¹¹⁸

Paddy harvesting was accompanied by snatching of firearms. For instance, On November 27, in Gopiballavpur’s Mahipal, Mihir Rana and Santosh Rana raided the house of a jotedar and confiscated one firearm without injuring anyone.¹¹⁹

Setting up of people’s courts was another feature of the movement here. As Santosh Rana notes in his memoir,

A jotedar would be asked to come to a definite location, record was made of all the aberrations and injustices conducted by them, how much land they have cheated from the poor peasants, how many women they have offended and different types of punishment was meted out. There was no violence involved in such popular courts and in maximum cases if they had apologised the jotedars were allowed to go. Death sentences were not passed. However, some of the jotedars were forced to give back the land they cheated on or pay fine...¹²⁰

A BBOBRC report summed up the various strands of resistance in this phase as follows,

The last week of November 1969 marked the beginning of a great change in the life of the people of Gopiballabhpur Police Station area. Overthrowing the feudal system and feudal authority of hundreds of years the brave peasants established their own rule...

Those who were downtrodden were on the top now and the brave peasants now sat in judgement on those very people who had so long tried them ...

¹¹⁵ *The Statesman*, November 29, 1969.

¹¹⁶ *The Statesman*, November 30, 1969.

¹¹⁷ *The Statesman*, December 3, 1969.

¹¹⁸ *The Statesman*, December 7, 1969.

¹¹⁹ *Anandabazar Patrika*, November 28, 1969; *The Statesman*, November 28, 1969.

¹²⁰ Rana, *Rajniti*, 165.

They forfeited with the help of arms the entire crop of lands belonging to oppressor landlords...

The *jotedars* have always kept down the peasants with guns. So, at the very beginning of the movement the brave peasants snatched away eight guns of *jotedars* in quick succession within two days. Scared by this development, the district magistrate took away the guns of all *jotedars* that very day by a special order. Immediately after this a complete power vacuum was created; whatever little power of resistance the *jotedars* had in some places was shattered. Some big *jotedars* had fled earlier; the rest now left the villages. The small *jotedars* found that they had no place to go. So, they began to surrender in groups to the Red Party...

Now the law was in the hands of peasants ... They sat in judgement over the gentry. Some were let off with a warning, some were fined, some were made to hold their own ears and sit down and stand up alternately. Those who were guilty of serious offences and on whom a sentence of death was passed by the peasants had already left the area. The brave peasants declared that the sentence would be carried out whenever the opportunity occurred. the usurers who have so long extorted interest at high rates and those who had utensils and other articles of the peasants mortgaged with them were directed to return the mortgaged articles without any repayment...

During the harvesting season every year the *jotedars* engage agricultural labour on a daily wage of one rupee or even less. This year the peasant fixed the daily wage at five kilograms of paddy and enforced it. Of course, this wage applied to the *jotedars* and rich peasants ... Orders were issued to big shops to sell articles at fixed prices...

All debts of peasants to paddy-lenders were declared invalid. As a result, peasants were relieved of the burden of debts accumulated through generations... ¹²¹

Though police activities had begun, people during this period had cooperated with the Naxals by guarding them against arrests. To quote from Barun Sengupta's report in *Anandabazar Patrika*,

Hardly anyone is coming forward to cooperate with the police. The reason, according to the police, is fear of the Naxalites. It is difficult to ascertain whether it is because of fear or for love for the Naxalites. The fact however remains that the police have so far been unable to capture the leaders. It is common knowledge there that almost all the leaders are still here in this area. yet no one gets any information about them. The leaders are being able to stay in hiding.

The police have come, the patrols are taking place but still the rich or well-off people in the area are negotiating with the Naxalites. The police are dubbing this as fear but the Naxals cite this as validation of their authority in the area...

The local people also admit that there are quite a few villages in Debra where the police dare not enter in small numbers - two or three men - even when armed with rifles. At least twenty men armed with rifle is the minimum requirement. In Gopiballavpur such villages are three hundred in number.¹²²

¹²¹ BBOBRC, "Report on Armed Peasant Struggle in Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border Region", 326-328.

¹²² Barun Sengupta, "Debra o Gopiballavpur'e Guerrilla Kayday Jono-Juddho" (Guerrilla Style Peoples' War in Debra and Gopiballavpur), *Anandabazar Patrika*, December 28, 1969.

The harvesting movement participants were not exclusively the Naxals. The Left constituents of the United Front were also participating in this, resulting in interparty clashes within the United Front as well between their supporters at harvesting sites. On-field clashes with the Naxalites were also noted. Even the Jharkhand Party was noted to have taken part in harvesting movement in Binpur area where their supporters forcibly harvested paddy from the land of a CPI MLA named Jayaram Saren.¹²³

Interesting views regarding paddy harvesting can be gauged from editorials and letters to the editor section of newspapers of that period. One reader noted that such mood regarding harvesting season was unprecedented. This historic wave had engulfed the entire spectrum from villages to the Writers Building. In rural Bengal the new prevailing mood was that ‘the government is our own, there is no need to buy land anymore’. A labour or a clerical staff returning to the villages brought with them news about public rallies in Calcutta where they had heard Jyoti Basu declaring that that they would not just rule but carry on struggle as well, because without the latter the poor would always be the disadvantaged one. Such words were triggering actions further as well. However, the writer stated that without proper planning such actions would backfire on the poor itself. The atmosphere of struggles and killings would invite police actions on one hand and the burden of litigations on the other. Force and repression always win against the poor. In rural Bengal the women use a curse, ‘*tor ghor e daroga dhukuk*’ i.e. ‘wishing that police enter your home’. This signals that of all types of losses, the one that was associated with police action was the worst. The reader emphatically suggested that any case and action related to the harvesting period should be left to be sorted by the local elected representatives rather than the police. Otherwise, the poor will be exploited even more.¹²⁴

The concern expressed here turned out to be true. Despite declarations of support for peasants by the ministry, police retaliation started once the harvesting season was over. 1200 and 700 Eastern Frontier Rifles (EFR) were sent to Gopiballavpur and Debra respectively. They along with West Bengal police carried out raids in the area to recover the harvested paddy. Anyone whose paddy stock was unaccounted for were confiscated. This created confusion as well. The stocks of many who did not participate in the *dhan loot* was also taken away.¹²⁵ The police in this phase of repression had been authorised to ‘shoot to kill’ if necessary and in such actions

¹²³ *The Statesman*, December 1, 1969.

¹²⁴ Letter to the Editor by Ahmed Ali, *Anandabazar Patrika*, November 21, 1969.

¹²⁵ Barun Sengupta, *Anandabazar Patrika*, December 28, 1969.

avoid hurting women or old people. This was the first time since the formation of United Front government that such a directive was being issued.¹²⁶ The government also made appeals regarding paddy recovery. The local constituents of the Front were advised to solve the issue politically by making arrangements to recover seized paddy and return due share to the owner, thereby preventing repressive or vindictive measures by the police.¹²⁷ With police and military in action and arrests of many leaders, the others had to take cover underground and kept moving from one area to another to escape the combing operations. Mass line like the harvesting movement was no longer feasible, thereby ushering in the next phase of the movement.

Annihilation Phase II, Action against Police and Demise of the Upsurge

It is noted across various accounts that the mass harvesting line adopted in Gopiballavpur was vehemently criticised by Mazumdar who dubbed it as militant economism at a meeting of the BBOBRC in Kharagpur. He reminded the committee members that annihilation of class enemy was the only path to capturing power and such economist strategies of forcible harvesting would lead to diversion from the ultimate aim.¹²⁸ Charu Mazumdar is noted to have said in the meeting, ‘I don’t want any more Gopiballavpur’ and that ‘mass movement and mass organisation is the weapon of revisionism’. He even advised the frontier committee leaders to destroy the guns seized by the people during the harvesting upsurge.¹²⁹ Given such feedback, the harvesting movement was withdrawn and exclusive focus was placed on annihilation. As Chatterjee notes in his memoir, with each such act the popular enthusiasm, though temporarily boosted, did not last long and withdrawal of harvesting movement would prove to be a mistake in the long run.¹³⁰

The Party issued a directive to the regional committee before April 22, 1970, that the first anniversary of the party was to be commemorated with annihilation of class enemies. This period saw successive annihilations taking place in the border region. As these increased, the alienation from the masses followed as a natural consequence. The popular initiative that was witnessed during the harvesting movement had waned. Also, actions against the jotedars had

¹²⁶ *The Statesman*, December 3, 1969.

¹²⁷ *The Statesman*, December 11, 1969.

¹²⁸ Rana, *Rajniti*, 169.

¹²⁹ BBOBRC,” Bartaman Party Line O Amader Abhigyatar Saar Sonkolon’ (‘Present Party Line and A Summary of Our Experiences) in *Aguner Barnamalay: Pnach Doshoker Jatrapath*, ed. Ashim Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Akhor, 2021), 50, 51. Document originally published in July 1971.

¹³⁰ Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 182.

created a vacuum in the area. Either they had been killed or had fled from the region. Many had surrendered as well. Intense police actions had resulted in arrests of many leaders. A reorientation was felt necessary and police atrocities provided the ground. Mazumdar advised Chatterjee that the only way to hold on to popular initiative and enthusiasm was to set example of direct attacks on state machinery and the best representative of oppressive state machinery in the region at that point was the police. Hence attacks on police camp was the way out of this debacle.¹³¹

The first camp attack was in the Gopiballavpur -Orissa border in a small police camp near Sulipada. When the squad reached the camp, no police or rifle was there and hence the action was abandoned. The next attempt led by Lebachand Tudu was on Jamshola camp of Orissa police but failed due to an accident in which Tudu was injured. The most successful one in this regard was the Rupsikundi/Rupaskundi police camp action in Singhbhum district. This was predominantly a Mal village and violence by the Bihar Military Police had created resentment in the entire Baharagora -Chakulia belt. The action was completed by a squad of 24, on March 9, 1971 in which 9 rifles (Rana in his account mentions 12 rifles) and 105 rounds of bullet were confiscated. 3 police personnel were murdered and 3 seriously injured. This rifle snatching strategy was said to be inspired by the Magurjan¹³² incident in Bihar.¹³³ *Amritabazar Patrika* of March 10, 1971 carried the news of an incident of March 9, 1971 at Manas Maria (as spelled by the newspaper)/ Manasmuria, near the Bengal -Bihar border in Chakulia where a group of 150 attacked a police patrol of Bihar Military Police comprising 9 men only. 2 policemen and 2 extremists were reported to have been killed in the incident.¹³⁴

Another police camp action took place in Khairbani, Orissa. An Adivasi woman in the area had been tortured and murdered and this camp was responsible for the atrocity. Those who had gone to complain were arrested, harassed and fined. Gun fight happened between the two parties, with the police locking themselves inside the camp. They were asked to surrender and on denial, the camp was set on fire. One person was unable to come out of the camp as he was

¹³¹ Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 209.

¹³² Magurjan is a village in Bihar, near Bihar -North Bengal border where a police camp was attacked on October 27, 1970. The attackers managed to acquire six rifles and some ammunition.

¹³³ *Deshabrati* (March 20, 1971), in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11,197; Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 213-214,217; Rana, *Rajniti*, 186-187.

¹³⁴ Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, interview by author (Jhargram: August 17, 2021); *Amritabazar Patrika*, March 10, 1971.

injured with a bullet. He had appealed to be rescued or killed, to which the Naxal response was neither of the two.¹³⁵

Such incidents though publicised, valorised and apparently successful did not see rise in popular participation. Prithwiranjan Dasgupta notes that the extent of local participation and initiative was limited just to involvement in investigation and basic surveillance. For a long-term effect and actual participation in revolutionary change, this is not enough.¹³⁶ Squad expansion did not see any improvement and police action which followed subsequently resulted in people slowly withdrawing support from the activists. The table below compiled by Amiya Samanta based on interviews with participants and relatives of victims gives an idea of the nature of activities in the area.

Table 5.9

ACTS OF VIOLENCE IN MIDNAPORE BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 1969 TO 1971

Name of Police Station	Persons killed	Attempted murders	Looting	Gun Looting	Forcible Harvesting	Arson in educational institutions and offices
Gopiballavpur Blocks 1 and 2	19	5	15	8	4	-
Debra	12	3	1	5	0	1
Jhargram	2	0	2	0	0	0
Jambani	4	0	0	0	0	0
Sankrail	5	0	0	0	0	0
Keshpur	5	0	0	0	0	0
Kharagpur	6	2	0	1	0	7
Midnapore	1	2	0	0	0	8

Source: Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics*, 161.

Samanta's account mentions other areas as well where people were killed, though very small in number like Nayagram (01), Panskura (03), Mahisadal (02), Tamluk (02), Contai (01), Ghatal (03), Chandrakona (02), Garbeta (01).

The movement suffered a setback due to intense repression leashed out by the second United Front followed by the Congress government, dubbed in popular circles as the 'white terror'. Most of the leaders were arrested by 1972. Initially even the police were helpless in the face of the popular upsurge. This had prompted the Home Minister, Jyoti Basu to engage the Eastern Frontier Rifles (EFR), a Central force, to suppress the movement. As Sumanta Banerjee notes, Jyoti Basu's action was perhaps the logical conclusion of the overall strategy adopted by the

¹³⁵ Leba Chand Tudu, "Aitihashik Gopiballavpur, Aitihashik Rupsikundi", 266-267.

¹³⁶ Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, interview by author (Jhargram: August 17, 2021).

CPI (M). The party believed in controlled violence in the rural areas aimed at minor goals like wage increase for agricultural labourers or restitution of land to the landless. A certain amount of agitation, often bordering on violence, suited the CPI (M) or the other parliamentary Leftist parties, as long as it remained within limits and controlled by the leaders, and did not attack the roots of the prevailing system by trying to seize political power. The CPI (M) whose support base is supposed to be the landless and small peasants wanted to make them believe that they were on their side in the struggle. In the electoral set up they also had the project of making the middle class believe in their actions regarding thwarting danger and anarchy. The strategy of controlled agitation within the framework of a parliamentary system suited their purpose.¹³⁷

This can be noted in the aforesaid account related to the stance of the Land and Home ministries of the government who committed to side with the peasants in case of clashes regarding crop shares during harvesting. When this seemed to be moving out of control, deployment of the EFR came as a natural corollary to apply the policy of ‘encirclement and suppression’ in Gopiballavpur and Debra, along with similar strategies in other Naxal pockets of the state as well. The EFR actions in Gopiballavpur had triggered debate within the Cabinet itself. CPI minister Biswanath Mukherjee was noted to have complained about serious punitive actions taken by the EFR at the point of Sten guns, large scale searches in the villages, people under arrest being subjected to hard labour and not being given status of political prisoners. Jyoti Basu was questioned on whether the Home Department had secured cabinet approval before authorising EFR movement in the area to which Basu objected by saying that it was not needed. Regarding segregation of political prisoners, Basu noted that anti - social elements were mixed up in the Gopiballavpur situation and screening was difficult regarding political elements and the others.¹³⁸ The government often downplayed the Naxalite activism as evident from newspaper reports. Jyoti Basu, on one instance, derided them by saying that the Naxals have no standing in West Bengal and ‘they are nowhere- except in tea stalls’. On their activities in Midnapore, Basu is noted to have commented that they were confined to a small area under one thana in Midnapore where they had indulged in looting and similar activities. In Debra, Gopiballavpur and other areas of Midnapore, the Naxalites had been arrested under specific charges of murder, dacoity and looting.¹³⁹ It may be contextual to note here that newspaper

¹³⁷ Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984), 140.

¹³⁸ *The Statesman*, December 13, 1969.

¹³⁹ *The Statesman*, November 28, 1969.

reports during the period also show a tendency to use the term ‘dacoity’ while describing Naxal activities.

The entire progress of anti -Naxal actions of the government can be traced from newspaper reports some of which have already been noted in different sections of the account provided above. The central strategy was to ‘flush out’ the CPI (M-L) activists from their hideouts in Debra and Gopiballavpur. Special operations were put in place to ‘keep them on the run’ after flushing them out so they do not ‘regroup’.¹⁴⁰ Joint operation by police of three states proved quite difficult for the rebels. The activists had initially enjoyed local support but with continued anarchy and police camps such support was on the decline. With repression on one end, the government took up developmental measures on the other, specifically targeted to rebel pockets and rebel homes in a classic carrot and stick anti-insurgency approach. Measures included, provisions of housing for poor and construction of irrigation works and roads thereby providing employment to the locals, deep tube wells, distribution of better seeds, fertilizers, cattle etc. Ameliorative measures to distribute relief to the poor were taken covering 8 % of the total population in Gopiballavpur as against 1% of the population in other areas. Two tribal welfare officers were noted to have toured the area to prepare reports for actions to be taken by the Tribal Welfare Department. Three small irrigation projects at a cost of 12 lakhs had been sanctioned. The government decided to undertake long term measures to settle landless labourers in Debra and Gopiballavpur areas. Because of scarcity of surplus land, a decision was taken to concentrate more on establishing and reviving cottage and small-scale industries. Seven developmental schemes amounting to Rs.35 lakh had already been undertaken in Gopiballavpur by the end of 1969. In land redistribution front, out of a little more than 4000 acres of vested lands, about 700 were distributed among the landless during this period.¹⁴¹

The Upsurge Analysed

The upsurge, though spectacular in terms of the stir it created, had many paradoxes. Amiya Samanta in his work provides an interesting analysis of the annihilations and participation patterns. Based on focused interviews with the relatives of victims, he compiles the landownership status of the victims in different areas as follows,

¹⁴⁰ *The Statesman*, December 7, 1969.

¹⁴¹ *The Statesman*, November 20, 1969; *The Statesman*, December 18, 1969; *Anandabazar Patrika*, December 28, 1969.

Table 5.10
STATUS OF VICTIMS IN SELECT AREAS OF MIDNAPORE

Name of Police Station	Big landowners (> 40 bighas)	Middle landowners (15-39 bighas)	For resistance to extremists	Moneylenders	Total
Jhargram	1	1	0	0	2
Jamboni	2	1	1	4	4
Nayagram	0	1	0	0	1
Sankrail	2	3	0	0	5
Gopiballavpur	5	5	6	3	19
Other Areas of Midnapore District	15	10	3	3	37 (including 6 others not falling in the mentioned categories)

Source: Amiya Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics*, 167.

Samanta notes that some big landowners were killed not because of their landownership status but for organizing resistance against the extremists or for being friends with the local administration or police. Often investigations made before annihilation was faulty. Sometimes a person marked as a big landowner may have been a marginal peasant or a middle peasant. Sometimes murders happened out of personal grudges rather than land status. Personal favours were rolled out to relatives of the activists and they were spared with minor acts of resistance against them. Sometimes, certain murders turned out to be counterproductive. Bhabani Chakraborty who was a landowner and Anchal Pradhan was quite popular with the poor peasantry in Nayagram whose murder sealed the Naxal prospect in the area. Such annihilations hence resulted in alienation from the masses and also bred criminality, as infiltration in ranks became easier due to focus on targeted killings.¹⁴² Participation pattern also tend to show less participation by lower rung of the peasantry as well as of SCs and STs, which should have been higher given their proportion in population of the area. Active participants were easily identifiable as activities were limited to a few violent incidents. Samanta classified 150 activists (65 in Gopiballavpur and its surrounding areas and 85 in Debra which included all important leaders and active participants) according to caste backgrounds and provided the following break up – caste Hindus -65, SCs-5, STs- 43, Muslims -4. If it actually had been a peasant rebellion, the number of SCs and STs would have been much higher as they constitute the overwhelming majority of the landless and the land poor. Also, the education level of the

¹⁴² See Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics*, 168-169.

participants was high indicating the predominance of the educated middle class. In Gopiballavpur, urban middle class people from outside constituted 61% of the total participants while the poor and landless peasantry who were supposed to be the lead constituted only 18.5% of total participants. In Debra the landless and poor formed 56.5% of the participants while urban middle class only 17.5. In Debra a sizeable section of the CPI (M) peasant organisation including local leaders like Murmu, who had a tribal following in the area, had joined CPI (M-L) which explains greater mobilisation. No such pre-existing peasant organisation formed the mobilisation base in Gopiballavpur.¹⁴³

The difference between the two regions is also visible in relation to differing opinions regarding annihilation. Members from Debra like Murmu, Shakti Mandal and Bhabadev Mandal were of the view that annihilation of jotedars should be attempted only at the time of harvesting when the peasantry was united on demand for protection of their rights. Only at this point, the peasantry could be expected to go to the extent of killing the landowners. Secret killings would prove futile in the long run. Murmu and Mandal in their analysis provide an example to depict the broad outlook of the Debra cadres in leading the struggle in the initial phase. Once the peasants had snatched 20 guns in a struggle but the leaders had returned the guns to the jotedars. This was vehemently criticised but the leaders held that the peasants in Debra had not reached the stage of creating armed squads. Even if they had kept the guns, they would not have been ready to counter repression. While citing the reasons for the fizzling out of the struggle, they noted that Debra failed to develop a concrete programme for democratic revolution, intensive struggle for land reform and the correct strategy for the same. It was necessary at that point to coordinate the struggle for higher wages with agrarian revolutionary programmes related to land policy, to prevent frustration among peasants facing ruthless repression. It was necessary to strengthen the authority of the peasant samitis and organise village guards, guerrilla units to prevent attacks.¹⁴⁴

They noted that the CPI (M) had failed to provide the support and required guidance both in terms of revolutionary theory and line of action, leading the Debra leaders to join AICCCR and the CPI (M-L). However, the new party along with the BBOBRC distorted the lessons from the Naxalbari line stifling the Debra struggle. Murmu and Mandal in their analysis noted that the Naxalbari line was presented as capture of power through armed struggle. The importance

¹⁴³ Samanta, *Left Extremist Politics*, 170-174.

¹⁴⁴ Gunadhar Murmu, Bhabadev Mandal, "An Analysis of the Debra Peasant Movement", 739-740.

of the peasant problem and the close connection between land distribution and capture of power were ignored. This led to isolation of the struggle inevitable leading the next phase to its doom. The peasant masses had quickly grasped the meaning of armed struggle because all the past struggles of Debra had witnessed bloodshed and strikes, but the wrong leadership and ideological weaknesses led to isolation. The regional leadership also tended to overlook mass movement and mass organisation, despite its advocacy by the Debra cadres. The Border Committee focused on individual annihilation as the only path of struggle and the Debra cadres ultimately followed the line put in action in Gopiballavpur-Baharagora, as they did not have solid ideological understanding regarding annihilation which weakened their opposition to the line.¹⁴⁵ Even Chatterjee notes in his memoir that the Debra comrades had initially denied abandoning the mass line in favour of annihilation. The latter can however be complementary to the former. The Debra comrades adopted the line after Gopiballavpur showed the way in this regard.¹⁴⁶ The entire period saw three trends surfacing – an atmosphere of conspiracy in the Border Committee, contradiction between intellectuals and peasants and finally sectarianism. Various areas of the committee contradicted one another instead of comrade like relationship between struggles of different areas. Old and new experiences clashed instead of complementing dialectically with one another. Hence the entire leadership became confused and the movement faltered. Regarding Red Guard action, Murmu and Mandal also commented that the open activities of groups of young students who came to Debra to propagate politics led to more losses than gains.¹⁴⁷

The annihilation line faded much quicker in Debra than Gopiballavpur. Police action was also much easier in the plains of Debra than in the jungles of the frontier zone. Violent incidents cannot be noted in Debra mid 1970 onwards. Murmu and Mandal categorically state in their analysis that,

It is the height of stupidity not to take into consideration geographical and natural advantages...Guerrilla zones and base areas are not one and the same thing.' Establishment of bases without expansion of area of activity is impossible and in Debra the area of operation had kept on shrinking due to the programme of annihilation.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Gunadhar Murmu, Bhabadeb Mandal, "An Analysis of the Debra Peasant Movement", 740.

¹⁴⁶ Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 171-172.

¹⁴⁷ Gunadhar Murmu, Bhabadeb Mandal, "An Analysis of the Debra Peasant Movement", 741.

¹⁴⁸ Gunadhar Murmu, Bhabadeb Mandal, "An Analysis of the Debra Peasant Movement", 741.

Similar views of differences in line between Debra and Gopiballavpur have been expressed by other leaders as well. Nitai Das in an interview noted that he along with Bhabadeb Mandal, Gunadhar Murmu, Shakti Mondal were not followers of the annihilation line. They were followers of Sushital Roy Chowdhury in contrast to Chatterjee and Rana who were staunch followers of Charu Mazumdar. In Debra the main leaders never participated in squad actions. When Roy Chowdhury got side-lined with time, Mazumdar's line dominated. Regarding role of intellectuals, Das noted that it is limited to establishing the exploited in leadership positions and depend on their initiative. The intellectuals and those who are in leadership position but do not belong to the exploited group should not act on behalf of the latter.¹⁴⁹ Even Rana notes that the Debra comrades were against annihilation. Leaders like Bhabadeb Mandal had a living idea about organisation in comparison to their counterparts in Gopiballavpur who had no prior experience of Left organisation and activism.¹⁵⁰

Samaddar notes that the Naxalites were not fair to the local specifics of the area at that time. Debra represented the classic agrarian economy of the time with fertile lands, dense cultivation and in Marxist parlance, high intensity of labour. Baharagora in contrast was predominantly a forest area. The leaders and the main participants were the Nayeks of the Malla-Kshatriya caste, though the tribal section of the population like the Santals and Mundas was quite high. The Naxals did not raise issues more specific to them and the area in that period like forest rights. The nature of mobilisation of a riverine floodplain area and forest area can never be the same. Regarding fast fizzling out of movement in Baharagora, Samaddar noted a strategic error on their part. In Baharagora the work was conducted by the militants from Kharagpur in Bengal but the area was administratively in Bihar. Those who were arrested there were taken to Hazaribag jail. The headquarters of Baharagora, retrospectively speaking, should have been Chakulia and Jamshedpur. Operations then would have been easier. The Naxals did not work keeping borders of three states – Bengal, Bihar, Orissa in mind. Working in the tri-junction frontier zone, they were against the administrative logic of the boundaries of the state. This was in line with strategy of the Chinese Communist Party which had organised peasant movement encircling frontier zones in various provinces. But conditions of China of that age and India of 1960s were different. When repression from all the three sides began, the ability to maintain flexibility and operate in the inter-border regions was not possible and feasible for them. If they had encircled and worked around Kharagpur for example, it may have worked.

¹⁴⁹ For full interview see, Nitai Das, "Debra: Dwitiyo Naxalbari", in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar series 11, 218-230.

¹⁵⁰ Santosh Rana, "Shomoy, Sangram O Gopiballavpur", 258.

The policy stance and attitude regarding border zones was unique as an idea but in the face of repression this backfired.¹⁵¹

The Debra Report in *Liberation* also made several observations regarding strategy. The Report notes that guerrilla actions are results of political propaganda. Confining attention to execution of guerrilla action alone and underestimating propaganda work, makes escape the only option amidst intense police repression. Relying on the masses is important. Tendencies that defeat the cause of the movement are avoiding mass connect, relying mainly on weapons, taking recourse to desperate actions in the heat of the moment and finally fleeing to survive. The Report identifies various weaknesses in the guerrilla actions in the area. Lack of correct and accurate investigation resulted in misfires. Strategically, identification of the peasants and labourers who suffer the most in the area are important as they can be the source for accurate and thorough information about enemy whereabouts. The task lies in converting the personal hatred to class hatred. Without this, single acts of annihilation based on personal hatred to eliminate an enemy cannot be converted into protracted struggle in the face of encirclement and suppression campaigns of the state. Correct strategic estimation of the enemy and correct understanding of weapons are also essential. Also, defeatist mentality needs to be eliminated, as without this, failures in execution of plans which are inevitable in a protracted struggle will lead to destruction of the movement.¹⁵² The movement at various points displayed errors in all these strategic aspects.

Attempts to build resistance in other areas failed and, in some cases, had disastrous consequences. Rana in his account mentions attempts to promote the annihilation line in Panskura, Kanthi and Keshpur. The main issue that prevented radical actions in this area was caste solidarity. The majority of people who owned bigger plots of land, belonged to the middle peasant category who in turn belonged to the Mahishya caste. Majority of poor peasants and agricultural labourers also belonged to the same caste. Hence in Panskura, there are instances of activists being captured and handed over to the people by locals themselves. The answer to this lies in the nature of class antagonism and the caste-class nexus. In Gopiballavpur, the class distinction also coincided with caste and community distinction which made mobilisation on issues easier. Also, the areas in the east were contiguous to national highway linking Digha, closer to railway stations, had access to flower cultivation and business, all of which made

¹⁵¹ Ranabir Samaddar, interviewed by the author (Calcutta Research Group office, Kolkata: June 11, 2024).

¹⁵² Debra Thana Organizing Committee, CPI (M-L), "Revolutionary Armed Peasant Struggle in Debra (West Bengal)", 270-275

alternative access to livelihood easier. When people have alternative avenues to survive, they have a natural inclination to avoid extremist tendencies and even oppose it.¹⁵³

Regarding community affiliations affecting mobilisation an interesting area of analysis regarding the nature of relations of production emerge. In rural India, as evident from this entire account as well, two types of relationship framework can be noted. One views the landlord-tenant relationship from a patron-client perspective in which both are entwined in mutually beneficial exchanges often based on personal relations taking kinship forms. The other perspective notes a structurally coercive and potentially conflictual relation based on unequal access to primary means of production. The first one is the integration model based on the moral economy of patron- client relations and the second one the class conflict- coercion model. Production relations when embedded in personal, customary and community bound relations alters the nature of class relationship.¹⁵⁴ The Mahishya solidarity affecting class-based mobilisations can be understood along this line.

Caste configurations are visible in both leadership and rank and file levels. In Gopiballavpur for instance, the rank and file of the Naxalites were mainly Santals and Malla Kshatriyas while the top leader and most of his circle belonged to upper castes. Few Santals were present in the second rung of the leadership.

However, regarding caste-based analysis of the Naxalite movement, Ranabir Samaddar's observation is interesting. According to him, one should be wary of excessive theorisation. In retrospective analysis, many issues can be raised but it misses out something specific and special to that time. The Naxalites at that point did not analyse the situation based on those factors. There are times when all social configurations do not remain fragments but tend to submerge into something greater which is of a more general nature. It is true that analysis based on caste and class help in understanding a part of the Naxalite period in the area like one can understand who were the active participants - the lower classes – poor peasants and labourers who in turn belonged to lower castes and tribes. It can also uncover what the Naxals could have done better in organisation and mobilisation. However, in his notion, by supplanting 21st

¹⁵³ See Rana, *Rajniti*, 178-180.

¹⁵⁴ Ronald. J Herring, *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 31-38

century ideas of caste-class- identity analysis on the revolutionary decades of the 1960s, an analyst will lose sight of the uniqueness of the period.¹⁵⁵

An incident in Keshpur had turned the trajectory of the movement towards disillusionment. Three youths named Sudeb Chakraborty, Shashi Midhya and Gurudas Murmu were beaten to death by a crowd in broad daylight, after they killed a schoolteacher and middle landowner there. The crowd had presumed them to be dacoits but what is evident from Chatterjee's memoir is that the trio had shouted 'Naxalbari Lal Selam' and tried to prove that they weren't dacoits but still the crowd did not budge from their actions. Thus, the irony lay in the fact that they died in the hands of the same people they had sought to liberate i.e. labourers and peasants, who reached the location from nearby fields after hearing the shouts of the teacher for help.¹⁵⁶ This also hints at the strategic errors pointed out by the Debra report earlier.

This incident forced Chatterjee to re-evaluate the annihilation line and even question Mazumdar. In a letter to Mazumdar, Chatterjee lamented the death of the three comrades stating the unbearable burden of carrying the responsibility of asking others to lay down their lives for the cause of revolution.¹⁵⁷ Mazumdar in his emotion charged response acknowledged the agony and stated that through pain the strength for greater sacrifice was born and the hatred had to be channelised into effective actions. Instead of repentance, it was necessary to 'flare up like fire and pay back in blood the debt of blood'. Mazumdar even analysed the contradiction evident in the incident to be between tribals and non-tribals.¹⁵⁸ Such response however did not ward off the mistrust spreading in the ranks. The death of youths led to solidification of doubts about the promoted tactic. Ashim Chatterjee noted in 1971,

We are actively witnessing armed struggle in our area and every single moment we have to confront the cruel enemy. Any political question here is not a fashionable debate of intellectuals or harmless questions to be delved in well-written articles. Here any political error is immediately translated into the language of blood and the lifeless, bloody bodies of our beloved comrades pinpoint the errors in strategy to our face... Can we treat with impunity the lives of our dear comrades and common people? Obviously not. Hence, on the basis of experience from our struggle, we are now analysing the party line to the best of our capability...¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Ranabir Samaddar, interviewed by the author (Calcutta Research Group office, Kolkata: June 11, 2024). This view was expressed in response to the question, 'Do you think caste configurations affected the spread of the movement in other areas like those in East Midnapore?'

¹⁵⁶ Rana, *Rajniti*, 178-182; Dasgupta, interviewed by the author (Jhargram: August 01, 2021); Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 198; *The Statesman*, July 7, 1970.

¹⁵⁷ *Deshabrati* (July 6, 1970), cited in Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution*, 164.

¹⁵⁸ Chattopadhyay, *Naxalbarinama*, 197-198; Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution*, 164.

¹⁵⁹ BBOBRC, 'Bartaman Party Line O Amader Abhigyatar Saar Sonkolon' ('Present Party Line and A Summary of Our Experiences'), 36-37.

Chatterjee in this document disagreed with Mazumdar's line on the nature of the Indian revolution. The party had rejected the possibility of uneven development of revolution in India and had ignored the relative differences in social, political, economic situations of revolution. Based on experience in the border area, attempts to carry out struggle simultaneously all over the region had proved to be a failure every time. Even after carrying out annihilations and propaganda work, the number of landless labourers and poor peasants did not increase in the guerrilla squads. The massive number of peasants who had come forward during the harvesting movement became passive in a short span of time. Also, it was not possible for peasants to stay active in revolution for long given family responsibilities. Only the student-youth, middle class, 'dacoits and 'lumpen' elements had natural mental inclination to adhere to this line. Even after 120 annihilations, the class enemies did not leave the areas. Those who had left the areas after the mass upsurge, came back.¹⁶⁰

Annihilations according to him had proven to be futile and the primary reason noted was the lack of emphasis on establishment of base areas and ignoring the military angle of organisation. Regarding importance of base areas, the document stated,

Out of 36 thanas in the border area of Midnapore, we have carried out annihilations in 22. Apart from this, we have expanded our struggle in two thanas of Bihar's Singhbhum district and three thanas of Mayurbhanj district. Annihilations have been carried out in some thanas of Bankura district as well... Till now we have killed 120 class enemies... we are ready to kill 120 more and many more if the need so arises, but with every annihilation the need for setting up base areas becomes more glaring. Otherwise, all annihilations are futile.¹⁶¹

In Mao's formulation guerrilla warfare has three phases. The first phase is about organisation, consolidation and preservation of regional base areas. The second phase involves progressive expansion resulting in gaining of strength and experience and once experience is gained the third phase of frontal assault or destruction of the enemy by conventional battle is ushered in. Base area in this context refers to stable military and political bases. Building a base area, according to Mao, requires a long and bitter struggle and three to four years of hard work. These base areas should not be built in the big cities or along the main communication lines. Cities and vast rural areas comparatively remote to central locations should be chosen. After a decision regarding the location of a stable base have been made, mass work should become the centre of gravity of the party's agenda. The masses need to be aroused in struggle. The cadres

¹⁶⁰ BBOBRC," Bartaman Party Line O Amader Abhigyatar Saar Sonkolon', 53

¹⁶¹ BBOBRC," Bartaman Party Line O Amader Abhigyatar Saar Sonkolon', 40-41

should solve their problems and work painstakingly among them to lay a solid preliminary foundation. Mass work, according to Mao, consisted in ‘arousing the masses for struggles to settle accounts with traitors and in launching campaigns for rent reduction and wage increases and campaigns for production’. In these struggles various kinds of mass organisations are to be formed, nucleus of the party decided, armed units of the masses build, organs of people's political power and thereby raising ‘mass economic struggles to the level of political struggles’ and ‘lead the masses to take part in building the base areas.’¹⁶² In another report Mao notes that, survival and growth of an armed independent regime of workers and peasants require the conditions of a sound mass base, a sound Party organisation, a fairly strong Red Army, terrain favourable to military operations and economic resources sufficient for sustenance.¹⁶³

Thus, mass work and base areas both seem to be necessary for long term armed peasant conflict and fulfilment of the objective of power capture. Similar importance to base areas was accorded by Murmu and Mandal in their analysis noted earlier in this discussion. Without base areas, popular activism fades away and the sense of alienation in many cases can lead to opposition. Alienation sets in among the party members and squads, as they become detached from the problems of the area, lose initiative and the impulse to escape also sets in. Without base areas, the line of armed revolution becomes a ‘line of vagabonds.’¹⁶⁴ In Mazumdar’s strategy, creation of base area and liberation army came after the successful annihilation of class enemies. Creation of squads with landless and poor peasants who on the basis of investigation and surveillance would take up the task of annihilation of class enemy. In course of such annihilation missions, members of such squads would brave death and transform into a ‘new man’. These reformed individuals would create their own base and in turn constitute the liberation army to capture power. This strategy was cited as a mistake.

Exclusive reliance on annihilation pushed the concepts of agrarian revolution, land policy, mass organisation and mass action to the background. The document notes that, for the last one and half years the party has not even mentioned the term agrarian revolution and did not realize the importance of any concrete policy related to land ¹⁶⁵. Without such stance, the base for popular

¹⁶² Mao Tse-tung, *Build Stable Base Areas In The Northeast*, December 28, 1945, accessed March 10, 2024, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_10.htm.

¹⁶³ Mao Tse-tung, *The Struggle In The Chingkang Mountains*, November 25, 1928, accessed March 10, 2024, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_4.htm.

¹⁶⁴ BBOBRC,” Bartaman Party Line O Amader Abhigyatar Saar Sonkolon’, 42.

¹⁶⁵ BBOBRC,” Bartaman Party Line O Amader Abhigyatar Saar Sonkolon’, 43.

initiative wanes off. Also, democratic centralism in the party was replaced by the spirit of bureaucratic centralization.

Susanta Jha in one interview talked about how blind pursuit of annihilation caused harm, with one example from Belduar village. After actions against the jotedars started, many of them were surrendering voluntarily to the party. Many of them even provided money and shelter. This actually proved to be a tactical advantage as it was creating schism within the jotedar class itself and using their shelter made evasion from police easier. However, Mazumdar criticised this as class compromise. Each jotedar was individually an oppressor and murderer and hence as a class, annihilation was the only answer. After such criticism, one such jotedar who was supporting the squad, was murdered by deceit. The jotedars realised that surrendering was without benefits and after this the rich peasants started to side with the jotedars as a class.¹⁶⁶

When asked for his evaluation regarding failure and arrests in an interview, Leba Tudu noted that they were alienated from the people and this was primarily because of the squad action orientation. Initially it was the people who has provided them shelter and food but later on these people themselves withdrew support. Santosh Rana and Mihir Rana were arrested from Kolkata, Ashim Chatterjee from Deoghar, he himself and his wife Koni Tudu from Kharagpur. As they had moved out of the region and had gone into hiding the alienation had increased. The local CPI (M) cadres moved into the vacuum and threatened people of dire consequences if they sided with the Naxals. Also, development was used as a tactic. The villages that were Naxal bases started receiving aid from the government. People received money and cattle. Tudu's family received a pair of bullocks. Canals and dams were constructed. Tudu also commented that in the initial days they carried out actions taking the opinion of the local people, as it had happened in the harvesting movement but when the struggle moved away from the mass line and assumed personal cadre centric activities, the people were left out. When police atrocities started intensifying the common people found the Naxals responsible for their hardships. The Naxals were unable to rescue people from the coercive state machinery and people could not tolerate such atrocities. The rebels had failed to arm the people and majority of them remained spectators. The action against police should have begun much earlier but was taken up at a time when alienation from the people had already commenced. On being asked that what happened to the lands that had been seized during this period, Tudu's answer was that it went back to the jotedars, as during police action, no lands could be protected

¹⁶⁶ Susanta Jha, "Amar Jiban, Amar Rajniti", interview in Ebong *Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, 332.

from reacquisition.¹⁶⁷ Samaddar however noted that some lands could be retained and later on rights received under Operation Barga as it happens in case of forcible land enclosures in urban areas, though maximum slipped away.¹⁶⁸

It will be analytical one sidedness to dub the movement as a failure. The movement coincided with the time when both the central and the state governments were at total disarray given internal tensions. In the state government, inter party feuds in the Front was being carried out publicly. As Barun Sengupta notes, all the main faces like Ajoy Mukherjee, Jyoti Basu, Harekrishna Konar, Sushil Dhara, Biswanath Mukherjee seemed extremely busy in various activities but none of these were regarding administration. Party work had taken precedence over responsible rule and administration. Policies towards development in the state was not being prioritised. If one leader is engaged in satyagraha and fasting, another is busy advancing class struggle.¹⁶⁹ At the Centre, the Congress was at the verge of a split finally culminating in the Lok Sabha elections of 1971. In this vacuum of responsible governance, the upsurge flared up highlighting issues that needed to be addressed in the area. The state penetration to suppress the movement made the peripheral area visible to the policy makers of the metropolitan zones. It was because of the upsurge and especially the harvesting phase that the ‘political’ penetrated the life of people here. Such interest in politics was not evident in the area, which had remained calm despite all hardships faced.

The movement saw emergence of mobilisers and leaders from the lower classes like Bankim Nayek, Amulya Kala Pahar, Leba Tudu, Hathiram Mura, Tharpa Mandi, Ramesh Bhuiyan, Laxiram Singh among many others. Without literacy in the traditional sense, these individuals had displayed intelligence in organisation at par with the students and intellectuals who hailed from Calcutta. The urge to live well amongst the toiling masses also increased. After 1969, the system of providing free labour to the cultivator in the area was done away with. After 1977, movement for hike in wages started and continued in phases. The bridge over the Subarnarekha River was another big change the area witnessed. The bridge got constructed after a massive people's movement led by Santosh Rana, who contested from jail as a CPI (M-L) candidate and was elected to the West Bengal Assembly in 1977 from Gopiballavpur constituency. This win proves the impact the movement had in the area. The bridge over Subarnarekha ended the geographical isolation of Gopiballavpur and Nayagram with the mainland Bengal and also

¹⁶⁷ Leba Chand Tudu, “Aitihashik Gopiballavpur, Aitihashik Rupsikundi” ,268-271.

¹⁶⁸ Ranabir Samaddar, interviewed by the author (Calcutta Research Group office, Kolkata: June 11, 2024).

¹⁶⁹ Barun Sengupta, ‘Kaj Cholche- Rajkarjyer Bodole Partir Kaj’, *Anandabazar Patrika*, November 28, 1969.

brought several changes – economic and social. Land movement was also noticed between 1977 and 1981-82. Surplus lands were occupied in villages under the leadership of the Naxalites and some places under CPI(M). Armed clashes between the Naxalites and the CPI(M) also took place over land grabbing. As Rana notes, in almost all the places, the landowners got defeated in spite of the support of the police and CPI(M). Very few local agricultural labourers supported them and the local CPI(M) leadership was with the middle classes, who were more afraid for their lives than others. On the other hand, those led by Naxalites were fighting on the strength of their moral supremacy.¹⁷⁰ A large number of women participated in the movement as well like Shipra Rana (wife of Mihir Rana) and Piyasa Dasgupta (wife of Prithwiranjan Dasgupta). In their interviews, both Piyasa Dasgupta and Shipra Rana expressed their concern regarding side-lining of accounts of women and their contribution in the Naxalite uprising, as evident in the dominant memoirs of the movement in the area.¹⁷¹

Account of the Naxalite period in Midnapore is incomplete without reference to the jailbreak attempts and the 1974 Indian railway strike. The jails had been packed with prisoners over and above their accommodative capacity. This resulted in the setting of resistance to shift to the jails. The jails failed to provide basic facilities and human rights violations were rampant. Protests were organised inside the jails for better amenities. Classes were held to spread literacy as well as political education. The walls of the prison cells were painted with slogans. Such activities finally culminated in the jailbreaks¹⁷² with Midnapore Central Jail becoming the centre of this new wave of resistance. On December 16, 1970 and February 3, 1971 Midnapore jail saw such attempts, the first resulting in deaths of eight prisoners. Till 1976 there were at least 20 such attempts by Naxal convicts in different jails of West Bengal.¹⁷³ Charu Mazumdar hailed the prison revolts on February 23, 1971 in the following words,

The revolutionaries who are today in the prisons of West Bengal have created a new history of struggle that none ever came across in the annals of prison life. These comrades realize and feel from the core of their hearts that revolutionaries remain revolutionaries, even while

¹⁷⁰ Kumar Rana, *Changes and Unchanges in Rural West Bengal*. Essay personally collected from author. Pagination unavailable.

¹⁷¹ Shipra Rana, interviewed by the author (Mohulbani, Gopiballavpur: March 5, 2021); Piyasa Bhattacharya Dasgupta, interviewed by the author (Ariadaha: October 16, 2022).

¹⁷² For accounts on jailbreak check *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 5 and 6 (available in Bengali). For various reports and comments on jail killings check Samar Sen, Debabrata Panda and Ashish Lahiri, eds., *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Kathashilpa, 1978).

¹⁷³ Amar Bhattacharya, ed., *Lal Tamsuk: Naxalbari Andoloner Pramanyo Tathya Sankalan* (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2021), 195.

in prison... Today the prison is a centre of revolt: today the comrades in prison are repeatedly making a mockery of it by escaping from it... That is why I offer red salute to the comrades in prison.¹⁷⁴

The spirit of resistance was kept alive by the railway strike of 1974 with Kharagpur becoming the epicentre. All these events prove how radicalism came to be intertwined with and structured into the genealogy of the region. Political leaders in their rallies today referring to '*Medinipurer Songrami Aitijhyo*' meaning revolutionary legacy of Midnapore, is backed by a cumulative history of centuries. Resurgences have been visible time and again even after the 1960s and 1970s finally culminating in the 2008 movement that placed certain areas of the district in the national political, economic and military radar. We can end this account with a song composed and sung by the prisoners in Midnapore jail that depict the poignancy of the times and the spirit of the dissenters which this account has sought to shed some light on.

The night is endless,
The rice jars are empty,
My eyes fill with tears,
& my heart is anguished.
How will I look after my mother?

I cannot stay much longer.
I hear the mountains tremble
As the people march upon them
& the mansions of the rich crumble

Do not keep me then, mother
As I too must go
To make the bright sun arise.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Charu Mazumdar, "Red Salute to the Comrades Behind Prison Bars", in *The Historic Turning Point*, Vol II, 120.

¹⁷⁵ Sumanta Banerjee, *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry* (Calcutta: Thema, 1987), 35.

Chapter 6

Conclusion to the Thesis

The entire study has been a humble quest to interconnect thematically, geographically and strategically, two armed resistances separated in timeline by centuries in a frontier district of Bengal. The first question that was raised in this context was whether *land rights* can be considered as the singular theme that links centuries of agrarian history and resistance together in Bengal – From Chuar Rebellion to Naxalbari. At the end, the answer to this question tilts towards the affirmative end, validating the claim raised in the introductory chapter. Ranabir Samaddar during the conversation on this theme agreed to this premise that land has always been the central question. The fact that the sharecroppers and labourers came forward in great enthusiasm to forcibly harvest the produce of the fields along with burning of legal land papers, symbolically signifies claim establishment and negation of the right of the jotedar to the land and its produce.¹ Pre-annihilation phase of the upsurge in Debra is replete with incidents of peasants demanding land rights and redistributive reforms. Analysis in the Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border Committee Report as well as by Bhabadeb Mandal and Gunadhar Murmu refer to failure on their part in developing a concrete programme of action based on land reform and redistribution, correct strategy and intensive struggle towards the same (as noted in Chapter 5). Going back centuries, the Chuar rebellion was also in response to infringement on land use privileges of a certain community combined with estate alienation of the traditional zamindars as discussed in Chapter 2. It is true that the nature of demands and the combination of rebel constituents are different but the central demand for land use privileges and its link to sustenance and dignity stay constant.

The incidents of the Naxalite period catapulted the land question to the discourse of both the central and the state governments. Jagjivan Ram, President of Congress (R), in a meeting of the Chief Ministers at a conference in New Delhi towards the end of November 1969, described worsening land relations in the countryside as the second most important problem before the country, next to communalism. The issue of land reforms, linked to social justice, was cited as an inescapable imperative for rapid economic development irrespective of ideology. Mere abolition of intermediaries after independence ensured neither justice to the tiller nor freedom from food shortage. A series of laws on security of tenure, fair rent and

¹ Ranabir Samaddar, interviewed by the author (Calcutta Research Group office, Kolkata: June 11, 2024).

ceilings on land holdings were enacted over the years but gaps in implementation were an issue. He noted that this deficiency is the cause for Naxalite violence in areas of ruthless agrarian exploitation of the poor and innocent people especially the tribals. Punishing the Naxalites alone without speedy implementation of land reforms was of no use. Failure of land reforms was a political failure.² The Union Ministry of Home Affairs carried out a study on the causes and nature of agrarian tensions of the period, the report of which highlighted land reform problem which had not benefited the actual tiller and could not be solved by coercion alone. The Left parties CPI, CPI (M) and the Naxalites had succeeded in pockets to organise landless workers, poor peasants and others with insecure tenancies, using their impatience and frustration regarding land rights and exploitation.³ Eradication of poverty and addressing the land to the tiller question became the rallying point of Congress (R) of Indira Gandhi, which along with the nationalist sentiment in relation to India-Pakistan war, resulted in her win in the 1971 Lok Sabha elections. Promises regarding land reform was also one of the primary reasons for the 1977 Left Front win in West Bengal Assembly elections and the reform attempts along with decentralisation of rural administration cemented their base in rural constituencies for three decades.

From accounts of the rebellion, *similarities in strategy* like burning of land deeds, attacks on representative institutions of government, murders, cutting away of crops from the field can be noted. Ranajit Guha's analysis on peasant insurgencies (as noted in Chapter 2), delineates certain traits of rebel consciousness like negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission, and territoriality all of which can be safely applied to both the movements under study. In terms of *areas of resistances* and *participation patterns* continuities exist, an issue that has been raised in the introduction to this study. Apart from the tribals who provide demographic link, example of another caste named Malla -Kshatriyas of the Baharagora-Gopiballavpur region can be cited here. Their lineage can be traced to the paik militias of Mayurbhanj and Dhalbhumgarh. The main discontent that triggered them to act against the Sadgops of the neighbouring village was gradual alienation from lands, the rights to which can be traced to rent free paikan lands of pre-colonial periods.

In the context of *Chuar rebellion*, the questions raised relate to its status as the *first 'conscious' anti-colonial resistance* and its legacy being a *precursor to modern political*

² Inder Malhotra, "Mounting Rural Tensions Can No Longer be Ignored", *The Statesman*, October 27, 1969.

³ *The Statesman*, November 16, 1969.

consciousness in the district. The answers to both these questions are in the affirmative and have been delved with in details in Chapters 1 and 2. The Chuars find mention in Hobsbawm's work on banditry as 'agricultural-cum-raiding tribesmen' of the jungle districts in Midnapore.⁴ The inclusion of Chuars in Hobsbawm's work and exclusion in Ranajit Guha's analysis, can imply that the resistance falls in the category of 'pre-political' primitive form of agitation lacking political consciousness. After noting the features of peasant consciousness as delineated by Guha, it has been safely concluded that the Chuar rebellion was not pre-political or non -political bred just by spontaneity or lack of consciousness. It was a conscious action on the part of the rebels who tried to take back what they thought was rightfully their own. Acting upon causes of deprivation for redressal is a political act, even if the tendency to equate consciousness with structured, organised actions by modern analysis leaves such resistances out of its purview. Regarding legacy, it has been reiterated all throughout this study that modern resistances need to draw upon past repository and cultivate popular memory to mobilise general public. *Deshabrati* issue of July 4, 1968 emphatically noted,

The peasants of the entire *junglekhand* area of Midnapore, known for its history of Chuar rebellion, is getting organized for rebellion. Stretching from Orissa to Bihar, this vast area is waking up to the consciousness of a new revolution.⁵

Local culture also bears imprint of this legacy through their folk songs and performances and thus is a part of popular memory as noted in the culture and resistance section of Chapter 2 of this study.

The questions pertaining to the *post-colonial agrarian setting, nature of exploitation* and the *revolutionary legacy of Midnapore maintaining continuity from the colonial to the post-colonial times through the nationalist movements and Tebhaga* has been dealt with in details in Chapter 3 of this study. It became evident from the account that the nature of exploitation which became the mobilising ground for the 20th century resistances directly follows from the effects of Permanent Settlement which transformed the agrarian structure resulting in the rise of a new exploiter-exploited relationship, the jotedar-moneylender being the former while the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers being the latter. An account of the transition, as provided in Chapter 3, from 'land to the zamindar' to 'land to the tiller' surrounding the

⁴E.J Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 30-31.

⁵*Deshabrati*, July 4, 1969 in *Ebong Jalarka*, Charu Mazumdar Series 11, XVII, no. 3 & 4 (October 2014-March 2015), 100. Translated from Bengali.

question of land ownership and use while traversing a timeline of more than a century maintains the thematic continuity connecting the early colonial to the post-colonial.

The Chapter also deals with the rise of the Communist Party of India, replacing the Congress as the main political actor in Bengal and in this understanding Partha Chatterjee and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya's conceptual tools, political society and party society respectively has been used. Common people, especially rural masses, need spaces of dependence due to lack of awareness as well as access to formal grievance redressal channels. The Communist Parties succeeded in becoming the bargaining platform and the medium of linkage to the formal political system. Through its elaborate organisation spreading to the grassroots and an enthusiastic band of young party workers, a party driven politicisation of the local became the new reality. Barun Sengupta noted in a 1969 report in *Anandabazar Patrika*, that the events in the last couple of years had changed the trajectory of rural Bengal and rural poor. The rural masses discuss more about politics than their apathetic urban counterparts. They don't discuss national news but the poorest of the poor are well aware of the parties and the leaders in their villages and districts. They walk ten-twelve miles just to listen to party leaders speak. They know the names of United Front, Congress and Communists. To quote Sengupta's words,

If they are asked, which party is powerful here? The answer would invariably be United Front. If you delve further and ask, which party of the United Front? The answer that would come after a pause would be *laljhanda* (red flag), communist.⁶

It was the policy dilemmas of the INC related to land rights and grievances of the rural poor that led to the first shift of political and party society allegiances to the CPI(M). The CPI(M) failed to honour its promises regarding agrarian transformation and the policy dilemmas of United Front culminating in the Naxalbari firing led to a temporary shift of the political and party society allegiances to the CPI (M-L). This in turn led to upsurges in different parts of Bengal including the undivided Midnapore district.

The *nature of militancy of the district* is another area of continuity. Even during the Congress days, resistances in this district in all phases of the nationalist movement -from revolutionary terrorism to Quit India Movement -have been quite radical in contrast to other areas, as discussed in Chapter 3. The Midnapore District Congress was autonomous in operations and activities though organised under Congress banner bore imprint of influences of Anushilan

⁶ Barun Sengupta, 'Gramer shob manush i aaj rajniti niye bhabche, kotha bolche', (The people of the villages today and thinking and talking about politics), *Anandabazar Patrika*, December 2, 1969.

Samiti, Jugantor and Bengal Volunteers Group. Predominance of members with affiliations to the Forward Bloc explain influence of Leftist strategy in organisation of movements. Civil Disobedience Movement phase witnessed successive killings of oppressive District Magistrates and events like those of Chechua Haat bears imprint of classic peasant insurgency strategy noted since colonial times. The Quit India Movement phase saw ‘competitive state building’⁷ in the form of the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar which is a classic example of legitimacy building among the people by carrying out various activities, fulfilling public demands and redressing grievances unaddressed by the state. Establishment of parallel administration in the form of people’s court can be seen in Debra and Gopiballavpur during the Naxalite phase along with local redressal of grievances. Tribal movements of colonial period have their own forms of local justice delivery mechanism in place as well.

The question regarding the *nature of effect that Naxalbari uprising had on the district and whether the effect was locally generated or imported from the urban centres* like Calcutta via the students-youths, has been dealt with in details in Chapters 4 and 5. In terms of consciousness the student community in any movement can be divided into various types. First, the politically conscious type which provides the organised leadership to movements. Second, the active members, politically conscious or semi-conscious, who surround the leaders and have humanitarian or democratic mindset to be a part of the movements. The third group, the most important one during movements, are the floating participants who are not members or ideological supporters of any organisation but do take part in a movement when it is at its peak. Naxalbari incident was the trigger that swelled the last group in huge numbers and the merging of all the three types during this period culminated in a huge wave of student participation driven by youth mentality that was unprecedented ever in the history of student movement in Bengal. Inspired by Charu Mazumdar’s words, CPI (M-L)’s programme of action and riding on youth sentiment hinged to the ideal of a better society, this unified wave moved to districts to inspire and mobilise movements to end exploitation. The mobilisation in Debra was locally generated given the existence of local leaders. The students-youths of urban centres participated in that existing wave adding to its impetus. However, in the relatively calm areas of Gopiballavpur -Baharagora, influence of the local youths who studied in Calcutta like Santosh Rana and the Presidency Consolidation in organisation and mobilisation was higher. Regarding the nature of student activism, Sumanta

⁷ Term adopted from Swati Parashar, “Colonial legacies, armed revolts and state violence: The Maoist movement in India”. *Third World Quarterly* 40, no.2 (2019), 346.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1576517346>.

Banerjee notes that many students who went to the countryside had no clear idea about the programme of the communist revolutionaries. Naxalbari had unleashed a process of soul searching among the youth, shaking them out from their indifference. Some went to the villages with philanthropic intentions, some with vague notions of organising the peasantry, some just to observe and some for the romantic fascination for adventure. It was because of such varied nature of the student participants that when repression was unleashed from 1970-1971 and activists hunted down not just in lanes of Calcutta but also in the villages, many shifted allegiances and came back to the milieu they themselves had rejected a couple of years back.⁸ It has been noted in the memoirs of Rana and Chatterjee, that many of the students who went to the villages could not survive the hardships of village and came back. The entire urban middle class during this period reflected the 'going with the flow' attitude regarding Naxalbari. Barun Sengupta in one of his editorials in *Anandabazar Patrika* during that period made a very interesting observation in this regard. He noted that one day suddenly, everyone was a communist. The 'craze' or to use the Bengali term 'hujug' to be part of a trend was destructive in many ways. The same people, who shuddered at the mere thought of increasing the salary of their house help by Rs. 2, were rallying for unity of struggle of the working classes. Such trends lead to dilution of purpose. Naxalism displayed a similar trend. Most of the people had no idea of what Naxalism was. Everybody was simply saying that the Naxalbari path was the only path of struggle as if they had internalised the entire struggle and Mao Tse-tung's thought.⁹ Despite this shortcoming, the role of the students-youths in building resistance in the district is worthy of a detailed account and has been dealt with in Chapter 4.

Questions relating to *the nature, issues raised, outcome and extent of success of the upsurge* has been dealt with in details in Chapter 5 of this study. Despite its short span, the movement was able to generate a stir, enough to destabilise administration and upset the status quo in the erstwhile calm areas in frontier Bengal-Bihar-Orissa. The major impact of the movement was penetration of the 'political' in the areas under study, which leads us to the next set of questions regarding *creation of a sense of 'agency' in the grassroot section and whether the peasant became a 'political subject' himself or remained just a means in the urban educated*

⁸ Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984), 52-53.

⁹ Barun Sengupta, 'Hujug O Hridayhinota - amader dui byadhi' (Mindless Craze and Heartlessness- Two ailments), *Anandabazar Patrika*, December 19, 1969.

middle-class project, who armed with the Left ideology in one hand and gun in the other, sought to 'liberate' the rural exploited.

Keeping in line with the overall political climate of Bengal, the culture of interest and deliberations on issues of the day had penetrated the areas under study. The term agency means capability or power to affect a desired change and development of this capability can be considered specific to time, place and socio-economic context. The radical nature of the time, the popular nature of the politics created the circumstances for creation of agency in a wide variety of subjects ranging from peasants in villages, slum dwellers in cities to students in colleges and universities. Rural poor rallied with the leaders, local or otherwise, for venting out grievances and seeking solutions. Calls given out by leaders, especially during the mass movement phases, received enthusiastic response.

The second half of the 1960's has been categorised by Ranabir Samaddar as a period of 'radical subjectivity'. The nature of radicalisation, according to him, was quite egalitarian. Everyone was a 'Red Guard in the service of revolution'. Workers were to go to the villages, peasants were to be educated in political ideals, jails had to be transformed into universities, affluent students had to 'declass' themselves, and all this did not happen in an isolated or exceptional way, but generally, *en masse* – in the form of a movement. Political necessities of the times led to new thinking and political subject-hood became a practical question of society.¹⁰ The concept of a political subject as espoused by Samaddar conveys three senses- a 'collective sense', 'sense of resistance to power' (particularly to the legal resolution of issues of power) and the 'sense of being a supplement i.e. he /she is 'not absorbed or exhausted by, while being marked by political regimes, control systems, power structures, legal codification, and present political establishments. A political subject symbolises resistance and desire for a new existence. Emergence of a political subject requires fulfilment of certain characteristics. First, critical understanding of politics, 'unlearning' present knowledge (academic, economic, sentimental, spiritual etc.) and learning new things about society and power relations. Secondly, training and learning to do politics i.e. political pedagogy with the understanding that politics is an ongoing war for which one needs instruments of action. Thirdly, political subject emerges from resistance to legal techniques of exercise of power. Fourthly, the ethics of resistance becomes primary similar to the role played by morality in

¹⁰Ranabir Samaddar, "Fifty Years After Naxalbari, Popular Movements Still Have Lessons to Learn", March 6, 2017, accessed July 7, 2024, <https://thewire.in/politics/naxalbari-communism-maoism>.

building a religious soul or by desire in building aesthetics. Fifthly, the new subject becomes the author of innovative new set of discursive and institutional practices which are collective and relational- both contentious and dialogic.¹¹ One particular group of this period seems to satisfy all the aforesaid conditions of being a political subject- the middle-class student-youths.

In the interview, on the question whether the peasant became a political subject and an agency of change himself or whether the middle-class students dominated the arena of political subjectivity, Samaddar noted that the main attribute of his work on political subject was understanding how a person or group becomes the key feature of the politics of a particular time, in this case a Naxalite. This Naxalite is sometimes a student, sometimes a peasant. He/she is someone who is a non -conformist, a rebel-visionary ready to go to extreme violence and have a separate philosophy regarding acceptance of death. The emergence of a political subject is associated with conjunction of circumstances associated with contentions, events, political practices and new desires, all of which characterised the Naxal decade. Hence, it is the nature of the time that created a large number of political subjects as counter figures to state sovereignty.¹² The attitude regarding death deserves special mention in this context of political subjectivity. Fuelled by Mao's ideas¹³, death was not seen as an impediment but rather as fulfilment of a purpose, an attitude that was witnessed not just among students-youths but also among local participants implying spread of political subjectivity. Death was seen as a catalyst that fuelled participation.

Kumar Rana recalling his childhood memory of the *dhankata* festival of Gopiballavpur can be cited here as an instance of popular enthusiasm and radicalisation,

The year 1969 should perhaps be called a watershed in the history of Gopiballabhpur. The *dhankata* festival of Gopiballabhpur (I am calling it "festival" consciously) can hardly be appreciated by those who have not seen it with their own eyes. I am lucky, that though I was only 7 or 8 years of age at that time, its memory seems to me to be of just yesterday. It cannot be described with the help of statistics, though from that angle too, it was vast. The eyes and faces of men and women harvesting the paddy, their body-language, their talks – all created a musical atmosphere, which overlapped the music of the songs they were singing. What did these men and women gain? Some received two bundles, some a

¹¹Ranabir Samaddar, *Emergence of Political Subject* (New Delhi: Sage, 2010), pp. xx, xxiv-xxv.

¹² Ranabir Samaddar, interview by author (Calcutta Research Group office, Kolkata: June 11, 2024).

¹³ Mao noted on September 8, 1944, 'All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese writer Szuma Chien said, "Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather." To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather. For details see Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works*, Vol.3, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_19.htm

little more. I heard of those days from a couple Chadra and Nilmoni Mandi, who first went to jail in that movement. What a public feeling of pride they had. Those who were terrified with the police, who were forever accustomed to obey, the cultivator, were no more afraid while getting arrested. They were rather proud to be arrested. They plunged into a surging spring of joy which enabled them to smash the established order, to uphold their self-respect and to get liberated from the chain which shackled their feet since childhood. The *dhankata* movement provided them a way to vent their pent up feeling of getting exploited and oppressed. It provided them with an outlet for their anger and grudge. The most innocent, immobile, silent and terrorized person was seen jumping to the sky in an outburst of happiness and rolling on the earth...¹⁴

Regarding top-down or bottom-up approach and initiative in mobilisation, the analysis of nature and role played by leadership is important. In such movements, placing the exploited in leadership roles can provide a different impetus. As noted in Chapter 5, one of the Debra movement leaders, Nitai Das stated in an interview that intellectuals and those who are in leadership position but do not belong to the exploited group, should not act on behalf of the latter. This brings us to the question of representation in politics.

Representation meaning ‘speaking for’ or ‘on behalf of’ in politics is a sensitive issue. Questions like who speaks for whom and to what extent an intellectual can claim to represent the voices of marginalised communities and subalternity as a subject and object of representation has been a matter of intense debate for long.¹⁵ Representing classes is a complex phenomenon. In this context Mazumdar’s specific advice for youths going to the villages (discussed in details in Chapter 4) becomes important like embracing hardships, abandoning comforts of good food, clothes and shelter, working with peasants and thereby building mass connect. Such actions if diligently pursued had the chance of offsetting the complications of representation to some extent. The masses in the area under this study especially in the frontier area, were disconnected from tide of events happening elsewhere. Rise of leadership from within is not an overnight phenomenon. It is true that the top leadership in the Border Committee belonged to middle class, upper caste Hindus who had not witnessed the hardships like the masses of the region who were lower castes or tribals. However, the age of the leadership, their sacrifice and mode of operations along with the spirit of the times generated different kinds of dynamics. It is difficult to compartmentalise

¹⁴ Kumar Rana, *Changes and Unchanges in Rural West Bengal*. Essay personally collected from author. The Bangla title of the essay was *Paschimbanger Gramanchale Paribartan Aparibartan: Ekti Anu Samiksha*. Pagination in Kumar Rana’s document unavailable. The essay was translated from Bengali by Biswajit Sen. It was written in October 2005 and first appeared in *Kaladhwani* (December 2006), a Bangla periodical and later included in a collection of the author’s essays entitled *Aksharer Kshamata Kshamatar Akshar* (Kolkata: CAMP, 2007).

¹⁵ The most cited work in this regard is Gayatri Spivak’s 1988 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

top-down or bottom-up mobilisation. There is a symbiotic chemistry and an interface of interaction exists between the top and bottom levels. In some cases, initiative was noted from below, while in others from above. For instance, the harvesting movement in Gopiballavpur was initiated by the women of a Mal village.

The question of agency in case of the Chuar rebellion is not as complicated as the Naxalite phase. Though it lacked formal organisation and was not backed by an ideology, both phases of the rebellion saw direct initiative by the aggrieved themselves who took up arms to reclaim what they believed to be rightfully theirs.

The final agenda of this study outlined in the introduction was a *basic comparative analysis of the two causally and strategically linked resistances* using the causation -mobilisation-organisation models of modern theories. Literature on social movements is quite huge and also beset with conceptualisation issues. Scholars like Ghanshyam Shah note that Political Science had until recently ignored studies on social movements. In India studies by historians, sociologists, political activists and journalists on movements have proliferated from mid-1960s.¹⁶ The stir created by the Naxalite uprising can be stated to be an important reason in this regard.

Simply understood, a social movement is a sustained collective action through which a collective voices their grievances and concerns, formally organised or otherwise, resulting in interest creation and awakening in a large number of people. It is generally oriented towards change, partial or total, in existing system of relationships and norms but can also be about resistance to change and maintaining status quo i.e. counter-attempts which are defensive and restorative rather than initiators of innovative change.¹⁷ Regarding change orientation the Naxalite upsurge belongs to the former while the Chuar rebellion to the latter. Objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership and organisation are important components of a social movement but none are a priori and static. They can be in rudimentary stages in some and well developed in others.¹⁸ The Chuar rebellion does not fit into such well-defined components as noted in this study while the Naxalite upsurge is fairly systematic in all the components.

¹⁶ Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India, A Review of Literature* (New Delhi, Sage, 2004), 15.

¹⁷ M.S.A Rao, ed., *Social Movements in India: Studies in Peasant, Backward Classes, Sectarian, Tribal and Women's Movements* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2016), 2.

¹⁸ Ghanshyam Shah, ed., *Social Movements and the State* (New Delhi, Sage, 2002), 17.

While studying any movement, the first major issue relates to structural conditions and motivational factors that lead to the genesis of a movement. Theories like relative deprivation and strain can be reference points for understanding causality. Ted Gurr's study on political violence incorporates psychological and societal variables and is based on link between frustration, anger and aggression. Greater the frustration, greater is the quantity of aggression against the source of frustration. Another link is between deprivation and violence i.e. greater the intensity of deprivation, greater is the magnitude of violence.¹⁹ Relative deprivation is understood as a perceived discrepancy between value expectations (goods and life conditions which people believe they are rightfully entitled to) and value capabilities (goods and conditions people think they are capable of attaining or maintaining given available social means). Inverse relations between the two, like increase in level or intensity of expectations without increase in capabilities, lead to increasing discontent levels.²⁰ Simply put, it is about the difference between what people want and what they get. Three patterns of relative deprivation exist- decremental (expectations remain stable and capabilities decline), progressive (expectations rise but capabilities decline), aspirational (expectations rise but capabilities remain same).²¹ Following Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Gurr divides values into three categories – welfare (linked to physical needs and self-realisation like food, shelter, health services and development and use of physical and mental abilities), power (desire to participate in decision making and be a part of political elite) and interpersonal values (status, communality, ideational coherence).

The structural strain theory as espoused by Neil Smelser identifies various determinants of collective behaviour. Structural conduciveness is one major factor which implies conditions conducive to episodes of collective action. Structural strain i.e. ambiguities, deprivations, conflicts and discrepancies, like panic due to real or anticipated economic deprivation, is another factor determining causation. This along with rise of generalised beliefs which identifies sources and characteristics of strain thereby specifying actions create ground for mobilisation of participants, aided by other precipitating factors. Operation of social control via agencies like police, courts, press, community leaders etc. are also vital as they minimise or maximise conduciveness and strain.²² Thus an instance of collective behaviour must be an

¹⁹ Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971),9.

²⁰ Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* ,13.

²¹ Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* ,46-56.

²² Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: The Free Press,1962),15-17.

un-institutionalised collective action to modify a condition of strain based on generalised beliefs of reconstitution.²³

If we try to understand the causes of Chuar rebellion using these frameworks, we may locate it in Gurr's decremental deprivation category. The rebels had been enjoying a kind of customary land use privilege (welfare needs category) for a long time. Due to effects of Company policy, there was a sudden decline in the capability, resulting in frustration or to use Smelser's formulation, strain. As land rights are not only linked to questions of livelihood but also to dignity and status, this loss implied a strain on interpersonal values as well. The Company had not yet grasped the nature of the frontier territory and had no idea about the nature and strategies of native resistances. This made the situation structurally conducive to the rebel coalition which included the local landed elites. The source of the strain or frustration was clear and the rebels directed their frustration-aggression towards that source, with the aim to prevent change in the status-quo regarding land rights. The Naxal upsurge can be understood causally in terms of both aspirational and progressive deprivation. It has been reiterated in the study on many occasions that the socio-economic conditions of the 1950s and 1960s shattered the dreams of a population of a newly independent nation who had aspired towards better existence after two centuries of colonial rule, thereby generating a crisis in all value categories. A number of precipitating factors in terms of policy failures transformed the feelings of deprivation into actions geared towards change.

Sometimes an event can become the threshold point for a movement to unleash. Such catalytic events, according to McAdams, Tarrow and Tilly, are not accidental or the starting point of the episode but the culmination of a longstanding conflict or strain.²⁴ Such events become precipitating factors for a movement to reach its peak and aid in mass mobilisation. In case of the first phase of Chuar rebellion, the military expedition against Jagannath Dhal and in the second phase, Company actions against Raipur zamindari and zamindari of Rani Shiromani, triggered off the movement. For Naxalbari movement, the defining event was the firing of May, 1967 which unleashed decades of frustration- anger-aggression against the ruling regimes. Weakness and interest conflict within the ruling regime at that point, both at the state and central levels, altered the power equation between the authority and rebels providing the systemic conduciveness for the movement to reach its peak.

²³ Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, 73.

²⁴ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) ,147.

While the stress-strain theories are useful in locating the causes and interest set linked to any movement, its mobilisation within the larger context can be best analysed using Charles Tilly's mobilisation model. The model can be summarised by his figurative representation²⁵

Fig. 11
The Mobilization Model: Charles Tilly

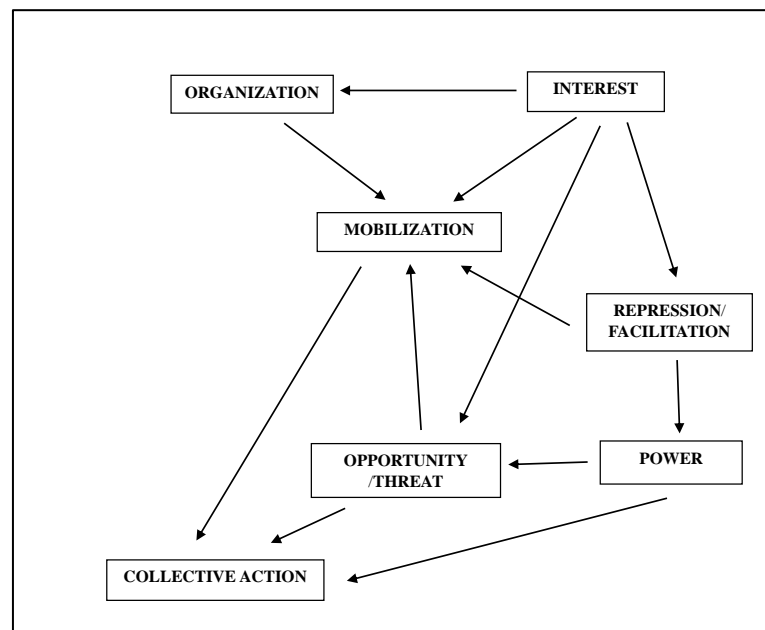


Fig.11: Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978), 56.

Mobilisation is understood as a process by which a group transitions from a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life.²⁶ It depends on various components like accumulating resources, loyalties, obligations, commitment, reducing competing claims etc. Identification of interests (in both our cases land rights and land use privileges) which in itself is a complex task is the first requirement for mobilisation followed by organisation. Organisation based on common identity (as in both our case caste /tribe solidarity) and extensive internal networks (community networks as in case of Chuar and ideological/party networks in case of the Naxalite) tend to be effective and efficient. Once the interests are identified, organised and mobilised, it automatically draws systemic response which may be repression or facilitation. Repression increases a group's cost of participation while facilitation reduces it. The effect of repression or facilitation depends on the extent of action, the scale of upsurge, power of group in relation to other groups, interests or interactions.²⁷ In

²⁵ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978),56.

²⁶ For details on various aspects of mobilisation see Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*,52-96.

²⁷ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* ,115.

case of the Naxalite movement CPI (M) was faced with a policy dilemma regarding state reaction to agrarian revolution which itself forms an inherent part of the Party programme. The Party in the United Front government initially took a policy stance of facilitating peasant initiative regarding land right claims and redistribution but reversed its stance when such initiatives turned radical. The state always has monopoly of coercive force and hence repression becomes the normal reaction against any movement. Often a dual approach of repression and appeasement is resorted to, as was the case in both these resistances.

Mobilisation in any social movement requires resources. Various kinds of resources are identified by theorists like moral resources (legitimacy, solidarity and sympathetic support), cultural resources (knowledge about organisation of specific tasks, tactical and strategic knowhow regarding mobilisation), social organisational resources (network building, coalition formation, information transmission, volunteer recruitment), human resources (labour, experience, skills, expertise, leaders i.e. constituents) and finally material resources (finance, physical capital like equipment, supplies etc).²⁸ In both our cases, all these resources existed in various combinations as evident from accounts in different sections of this study. The Chuar rebellions may not be organised in the modern sense of the term but no resistance is possible without it. Special mention to leadership of the charismatic kind as a resource can be mentioned here. For instance, Jagannath Dhal and Rani Shiromani in case of the Chuar rebellions. Naxal period also witnessed charisma led mobilisation, especially depicted in writings and appeals of Charu Mazumdar.

Another important dimension present in both the movements is the emotional one. Any social action involving individuals is bound to have emotional– sentimental quotient often ignored by social-scientific theories. Emotions are in itself a resource for movements.²⁹ Certain emotions are reflex emotions like fear, surprise, anger, disgust, joy, sadness which trigger actions without much deliberation. This can explain the Sonam Wangdi incident of May, 1967. Some of them can even act as counter-resource crippling a movement like fear. This happens during the repressive phase in any movement that reverses its trajectory. Next types are affective bonds like love, trust, respect etc. Trust is an important factor in political arena, as it leads to belief in individuals, organisations and their statements. Belief of rebels in their

²⁸ Bob Edwards and John D. McCarthy, “Resources and Social Movement Mobilization”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 125-128.

²⁹ See Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta, “Emotional Dimensions of Social Movements”, in *The Blackwell Companion*, 413-423.

leaders like Shiromani and of peasants -labourers in the local leaders and youths in Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora was an important mobilisation point. Mood is another resource as without feelings of hope or optimism that a collective action can effect positive transformation, a movement cannot succeed. Complex moral emotions like compassion and empathy are other emotive resources, especially in cases where activists and beneficiaries have minor overlap. The fact that a large number of students left the comforts of their life and embraced hardships in the villages to help build and lead movements to end exploitative relations of the rural poor is the best example of this emotion. The sentiment of the Chuars in relation to status attached to land privileges is another example. Strategy lies in exploiting the right kind of emotions specific to a given movement dynamic.

The aforesaid account was a humble attempt to use some prominent theoretical strands regarding causation, mobilisation and organisation, to analyse the two resistances chosen in this study. The Chuar and the Naxalite resistances are separated by centuries and there is primary difference between the two in terms of change orientation, systematic organisation, existence of ideology and documented strategy. However, the basic elements regarding genesis and causation, mobilisation in relation to political context, reaction to opportunity, threat and repression, resource usage and emotive element appear similar. Going back to the research agenda, this analysis section sought to bring the Chuar rebellion into mainstream deliberations on movements and resistances. The aim to dispel the notion of interlinkages between idea of modernity and rationality and how it is erroneous to dub such resistances as pure pre-political, pre-modern banditry stands fulfilled in this regard. This attempt to use modern models of social movement to understand the dynamics of a century's old anti-colonial movement, opens the scope for further deliberations and research in this regard.

The defining tagline of the study as stated in Chapter 1 was, *divided by centuries and united by issues and strategies*. From the entire study, this claim stands validated. Issues of land rights, the 'frontier' status continuity in terms of geography and economic development, resistance strategies, reactions to repression and state response and finally demography of participation patterns appear continuous. Regarding the Naxalite upsurge in Midnapore, this study has been novel in the sense that it compiled all available accounts ranging from interviews, memoirs and newspaper reports (both Bengali and English versions) thereby providing a one stop destination to understand the trajectory of the movement in the district and supplemented the accounts with census data to help analyse participation patterns by

clarifying the demography of the region, locations and land use patterns to understand interconnectedness. Shortcomings exist in this work given limitation of resources available to an individual for extensive field work, dependence on memoirs, failure to access government intelligence reports and jail records of the Naxalite period that could have enriched the findings. Endeavours in this direction now remain an objective for future attainment.

It may be noted here that women participated in large numbers in the district during the Naxal upsurge. However, the dominant narratives on the movement have bypassed such contributions as noted in the analysis section of Chapter 5. This remains a prospective area for future research.

Though the study stops at the Naxalite period in Midnapore (1968-1971), continuity of resistance in the area has been noted in the form of Lalgarh uprising and issues of *jal-jangal-jamin* highlighted at the very introduction to this study. This remains another prospective area of study. Journalistic accounts of the movement exist, but archival silence and non-access makes such studies difficult. Future prospects regarding access to sources can open the arena for a detailed in-depth study of the movement. The entire frontier Bengal has untapped research potential in many aspects ranging from sociological and anthropological studies to economic and cultural studies, all of which in turn can be linked to politics.

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Annexure I

Interview Questionnaire

(Questions to guide narration by respondents in conversational-participatory and qualitative interviews conducted bilingually in Bengali and English)

Respondents

Prithwiranjan Dasgupta, Mihir Rana, Ashim Chattopadhyay/Chatterjee, Ranabir Samaddar, Shipra Rana, Piyasa Bhattacharya Dasgupta, Kumar Rana & Niranjan Bera.

- You were a direct participant in the Naxalite movement in Midnapore. Can you share the memories of those days?
- Though decades have passed, can you recall the moment of receiving the news of Naxalbari firing and the nature of the narrative that reached you?
- What inspired you to move to the villages of Midnapore to mobilise the inhabitants of an erstwhile calm zones in frontier Bengal?
- Why Debra, Gopiballavpur & Baharagora?
- What were the structural conditions under which the movement emerged?
- What, in your opinion, were the causes of the movement there?
- Was long term deprivation the central cause? If so, why did the people not rebel after years of hardships and exploitation?
- Did the land question and ‘land to the tiller’ demand feature in the agenda for mobilisation?
- What were your strategies regarding mobilisation of the common people and how did you gain legitimacy among the people there?
- How far did you succeed in generating consciousness about their condition and its redressal?
- Did the upsurge create a sense of ‘agency’ in the grassroot sections of the region and inspire popular initiative?
- What were your overall objectives, programme of action, strategy and the nature of changes you sought to achieve in the region?

- What was the participation pattern in terms of caste, tribe and class configuration?
- From various analysis available, caste-class nexus have seemed to play an important role in mobilisation. What is your opinion in this regard?
- Can you shed some light on the nature of leadership in the different areas where the upsurge was noted?
- In what ways were the three pivot areas of the upsurge- Debra, Gopiballavpur and Baharagora- different in terms of issues, organisation, nature of local support, participation pattern etc?
- What do you think were the reasons for limited spread of the upsurge in Baharagora?
- To what extent was the movement a success?
- What were the shortcomings and what could you have done better for the cause of the upsurge?
- Was any substantive social, political or economic change noted in the area after the upsurge?
- Accounts of earlier Left mobilised movements like Tebhaga have glorious accounts of women participation. To what extent was active participation of women noted in the upsurge and why is the existing literature silent in this regard?
- What are your views regarding the Lalgah upsurge?
- Can the legacy of resistance in terms of issues and strategies linked in these cases?
- What, in your opinion, are the differences between the late 1960s Naxalite upsurge and the 2008 Maoist one?
- In recent times there has been a resurgence of interest in the Naxal period of Midnapore due to publication of two memoirs. Despite your scholarly insights on various issues and informative volumes on the Naxalite decade, why did you refrain from writing a memoir? (Question to Ranabir Samaddar)
- How far do you think memoirs and autobiographies give a true picture of events and can they be relied on for research especially in cases where archives are silent? (Question to Ranabir Samaddar)