

**The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their
Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar
Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)**

Khagesh Singha¹

¹Independent Research Scholar
Department of History
University of North Bengal
Darjeeling, West Bengal, India
Email: khageshsingha2@gmail.com

Abstract: *The present work attempts a detailed study of the Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri peasants and their Movement in the Uttar Dinajpur District with special reference to Islampur Subdivision. 'More food should be Produced and food is Brahmin'- Taittiriya Upanishada. The food sustains human life. Agriculture gave permanent residence to people. Before agriculture human life was based on food gathering. Human beings became food producers as a result of agriculture. The agricultural system, land revenue and peasants community were influenced by different rulers. The Surjapuri Peasants community here were ruled by the Nawab of Bogra, the Nawab of Purnea, the Benali estate and Zamindars of Kishanganj. Many Surjapuri peasants had to face the oppression of Nawab, zamindars, Jotdars and Tahoshildars. Additional burden of tax was imposed on Surjapuri Peasants. Even after paying tax or revenue, many Surjapuri peasants did not get any receipt. At one time, the peasants became impatient with the oppression and exploitation and took to the path of revolt. From 1938 to 1946 AD, a vigorous peasants united movement emerged. Bataidar and Tebhaga Movement were important among them.*

Keywords : *Bataidar, Tebhaga Movement, Islampur, Peasants, Surjapur, Zamindars etc.*

Date of Submission: 23-07-2024

Date of Acceptance: 27-07-2024

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)

Introduction

A place is named after rulers, population and mythological event etc. This Surjapur Pargana is also named for one of the reasons. But there is no historical evidence. The possible reason for the naming of this Surjapur could be as follows. It is not easy to find out where from this 'Surjapur' nomenclature came from. It is known that this area was under the rule of Mithila sometime between 1100-500 BC. This area was ruled by king vedeha of Mithila, whose other name was Janaka. During the age of Mahabharata, this Surjapur Pargana was sparsely populated. The Pancha Pandavas spent their exile in this region. Local tradition still Speaks of the struggle and conquest of the Kiratas and a Kirata(Kiranti) women from the morang or tarai is said to have been the wife of Raja Virat, who, according to legend it is said in the Mahabharata, according to legend gave shelter to Yudhishtira and his four Pandava brothers during their 12 years 'exile'. The site of this fort is still pointed out at Thakurganj in the north of the district". In this region there was also the kingdom of the Virata king's brother-in-law, Kichak. Villages called Kichaktola continue to bear its testimony even today. Karandighi police station was the ruled by king Karna of Anga Rajya. The pond name 'Karnadighi' continues to bear his memory even today. During the reign of king Vikramaditya, Five brothers named Asu, Benu, Borjan, Nanha and Kanha built the fort at Chakulia Police station of Goalpokhar-2, which is known today 'Asuragar'.

At other times some other Surya dynasty King ruled this area. It may also be that the kingdom of Aditya Sur expanded here after the rule of the Sura dynasty began in the Gour country. It is also not impossible that there was tribal in influence in the region. These tribes worshipped the Sun. All these reasons may have given the name Surjapur. Although the people here call themselves Surjapuri, Surjapur Pargana was created during the Mughal period. Sher Shah ruler of the Suri dynasty, ousted Humayun and occupied the throne of Delhi. Humayun fought with Sher Shah to regain his empire. Then Syed Ahmed Khan Dastur helped emperor Humayun in this war. About surjapur pargana professor Dr. Partha Sen said -"Buchanan's information shows that one Syed Ahmed Khan Dastur helped emperor Humayun when Humayun was busy recovering his lost Kingdom in 1545 AD. As a reward, emperor Humayun gifted surjapur pargana to Syed Ahmed Khan Dastur". On November 1st,1956, on the recommendations of the 'State Reorganisation Commission' this Surjapuri tribe with an area 759 square miles was included in West Bengal from Purnea district. Thakurganj, Islampur, Chopra, Kishanganj, Goal Pokhar and Karandighi Police stations belonged to surjapur pargana. Above

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)

mentioned places were included in the boundary of Transferred Area. These areas were formed as Islampur Subdivision, 1st April 1992 AD.

Surjapur Pargana was again under Tajpur Sarkar. After Syed Ahmed Khan Dastur, his son-in-law Syed Ray Khan got the Zamindari here. During the reign of Syed Fakhruddin Hussain, Surjapur Pargana was included in Lord Cornwallis's Permanent settlement. Fakhruddin had two sons, Didar Hussain and Akbar Hussain. Didar Hussain's clan ruled in Khagra and Akbar Hussain's relatives ruled the Nawabi to Kishanganj. Later Kishanganj nawabi could not survive for long times. Certain parts of Kishanganj Nawab were bought by Dharma Chandra Lal of Nazarganj and his son PC Lal. Besides, there were many small Zamindari system in this area. There were also katchari houses of zamindars, Dak bungalows and Nil kuthi of the English. Peasants used to deposit their tax in this katchari houses. Pakargach village had the Katchari house of PC Lal and Zamindar Shyampada in Nandoi village. Ladhi Zamindar house was in Ladhi Village of Chakulia Police station. The founder of the zamindari was Dwarika nath Das. PC Lal gave him about 2000 of land in mouzas like Dharampur, Chakulia, Baligara, Bhikarpur, Ladhi, Gerua, Malingaon, Kahata Ghoradappa etc. under certain conditions. Zamindar Narayan Pathak's house was in Narayanpur village of Majiali village panchayat of Chopra police station. His zamindari extended to Sonapur, Dolua, Khunia, Kaliganj and Tetulia of Bangladesh.

There was a Zamindar in the present Melamath of Islampur. The Islampur Zamindar houses is in a dilapidated conditions today and some descendants still live in the house. The Zamindari was extended to Haldibari of Jalpaiguri, Kishanganj, Puthiya, Thakurganj and Baliadangi, Thakurgaon in Bangladesh. Bolancha Zamindar house was in Bolancha Village, 6 km from Islampur. Jabaha Ali was the landlord here. PC Lal and Nawab Mohiuddin Hussain of Khagra gave him the responsibility of collecting the tax of the lands of Bhotamari, Shitalgaon, Nirbhay Chandi, Chutiakhor, Bolancha, Iluabari, Chapasar, Fulbari etc. under Chopra police station. Ram Ranjan Bhagat had a Zamindar house in Ramganj. Ram Ranjan Bhagat received the Zamindari from Raja Prithvi Chandra Lal and khagra's Nawab Ata Hussain. Gaysuddin Sarkar had his Zamindar house at Goagaon in Goalpokhar police station. PC Lal settled some lands in Goagaon region to him. There was a Zamindar in Bikour of Karandighi police station. Zamindari of Bikour Zamindar was spread over Bikour, Keshabpur, Gaigao, Sabdhan, Bhagduaring, Garulbhasa, Belbari, Chunibhita, Bhagshala, Swadhinpur, Basudebpur and Narayanpur Mouzas.

Besides, the British also built various Nilkuthis. A Nilkuthi was established at the initiative of Keri Saheb at Nillkuthi village on the banks of Nagar river in Belbari mauza of Karandighi police station. Indigo was cultivated on both sides of Nagar river. Peasants were forced to cultivated Indigo. If a peasant refused to grow Indigo, he was flogged. The British had one Dak Bungalows each at Debiganj of Goalpokhar and Dalkhola. The British held their meetings in this Dak Bungalows.

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)

Socio-Economic Condition of Peasants in Islampur Subdivision

People of various profession lived in this Transferred Area. One of them was the peasant community. A lot of jute and paddy were grown in this area. Aman (Heuti) paddy was cultivated on 73 percent of the land. But peasant here could earn money by selling jute. "The jute crop is most extensively grown in the north-east of the district in the Kishanganj subdivision. Where thanas Bahadurganj and Islampur account for 53000 acres". The land was ploughed with cow. Peasants used to express their life emotions through songs while tilling the land. Their real life was reflected in every line of the song. The more ploughs and cows a house had, the richer it was. The Peasants used to take the produced here to Kishanganj and Haldibari market for sale. The Peasants community used to observe several rituals or puja-parbans related to agriculture. Among them were 'Gariguri' and 'Cow Chumani(Cow worship)'. Several days before the Kojagari Laxmi Puja, 'Gariguri' or 'Sora Sora' ritual is performed. This day is celebrated with great fanfare in the Peasants community. In the evening, the Peasants would go to the paddy fields and offer milk and bananas to kshetra Devi. Besides, atapchal pitha is made. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, was commemorated by verses or rhymes.

*'Khato Langal Dighal Ish,
Hamar Dhaner Baro Baro Shis.
Loker Dhaan Aaul Bhaul,
Hamar Dhan Dharmer Chaul.
Hanser Dima Kachur Futi,
Aay Maa Lakshmi Hamar Bhiti.
Sora Sora'.*

Cow was the main domestic animal for peasant community. The Cows and Buffaloes were the true friend of the peasants. Cultivation was done with plough carried by the Cows and Buffaloes. The products were taken to the market by Cow Carts or Buffalo Carts for sale. Cows were Sacred animal to Hindu Peasants. Some customs and folk culture were also prevalent at that time, which is still prevalent in the villages. This folk culture and folklore is observed on the day before Kalipuja and on the night of Kalipuja. Cows were bathed and oiled, vermilion applied. Cows were worshipped as Gods. Cows were fed with various fruits and other foods. Cows and Cow dung were worshipped in the morning. Which is popularly known as "Gareya puja" or "Garu Chumani" in this society. People who have cows in their houses in the village are still following this custom.

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)

Peasants Movement in Islampur Subdivision

The land in this area was suitable for agriculture. Agriculture was the mainstay of the people. "It will be seen that the percentage of the cultivable land was 74.5 and that of uncultivable land was 25.5". People here used to do agriculture with cows and buffaloes. As a result of the permanent settlement there was no chance in the Zamindar here. The zamindars here helped the Peasants in cultivation but between 1917 to 1940 there was a rift between the Peasants and Zamindars, Jotdars and Tahoshildars. Earthquakes in 1897 and 1934 caused many losses to Peasants. Despite this, the zamindars did not reduce tax collection. When the Peasants were unable to pay the tax, the Tahoshildars started oppressing them. The Jotdars of Islampur subdivision used to exploit and oppress the Peasants in various ways. In 1938 to 1939 AD a violent Peasants revolt took place in the Sonapur and Betbari in Islampur Subdivision. In 1936, two Peasants were detained at Kachari house in Jagtagaon. Vidhubhushan Nath freed the arrested Peasants.

The land revenue administration report of 1916-17 had particularly mentioned that absentee zamindars in Kishanganj subdivision had developed a continued tendency to dispose tenants with a view to obtain enhanced rent or realise various customary abwabs. Certain types of criminal offences were extremely common in Purnea district even as late as 1930-40. It was a routine matter for the landlord or the Amlas to send for the recalcitrant tenants and to keep them tied up in the Kutchery as a public exhibit to terrorise other tenants. The tenants were put into various torturous physical punishment and extraction of thumb impression of the poor tenants on blank paper was a common zulum in Purnea(district)". The relationship between Peasants and Landlords was particularly bad in the Transferred Area. The Tahosildar did not issue any tax receipts to the Peasants. Zamindars used to sue the Peasants for payment of tax. In 1938, Santal Bataidars protested in Damdaha area in the western part of Purnea district. This movement of Santal Bataidars continued till 1942 AD. The impact of this movement fell on the entire district of Purnea. Thereafter print receipt were started to be given to Peasants in Purnea district. The land Revenue Administration Report of 1940-41 particularly referred to the absentee zamindars of Purnea as the main source for strained relations. A large number of tenure holders of the district cultivated their lands through Bataidars who were mostly Santals in the Dharampur Pargana. The landholders seldom granted receipts and always tried to oust the Bataidars when they saw fit. The bataidars organised and insisted on getting rent receipts. A Conciliation Committee consisting of two representatives of tenure-holders and two Santal bataidars with Deputy Magistrate was set up to restore good relations. The Collector also toured in the area and helped the Committee. As a result, the tenure-holders began to grant receipt in printed forms.

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)

Before the permanent settlement, the land revenue system of the area was known as 'Gachhabandi System'. The landlord was also known as 'Gachhadar'. The names 'Gowalgachh', 'Suphalgachh' and 'Kalagachh' bear its testimony even today. A peasant community called 'Sikmidar' existed in Surjapur Pargana. There was also a type of land called 'Milith-Lathe-Lage'. The person under whom this land was held did not have to pay any tax to the Zamindars. Zamindars had kachari houses in Matikhunda, Goalpokhar, Ramganj and Chakulia of Islampur Subdivision, where Peasants used to deposit revenue. If the Peasants were unable to pay the revenue, their plough Cows were brought to Kachari houses by crocs. These Kachari houses of the Landlords were symbols of Peasants oppression. In these kachari houses, the Peasants were tied up and subjected to physical torture. Andharu Singha of Atghariya protested against Peasants oppression at Katcharibari in Panasi estate of Jagtagaon. In 1942, Satinath Bhaduri wrote in a letter to Vidhu Bhushan Nath of Nandoi that, "No peasant leader should bow down to the tyranny of the Zamindars and file a case against Zamindars in court". At that time, the Tebhaga Movement was strongly organised in various parts of undivided Dinajpur. Bataidar Movement was going on in Surjapur Pargana since long ago. The aims of the two movements were almost the same, differing only in names. The Peasants of Islampur subdivisions were against Zamindar and Tahoshildars from earlier. Together these two movements organised strong Peasants Movement in Islampur Subdivision. The Tebhaga Movement under the leadership of Bacha Munshi strongly organised in Chopra police station. In 1946, The Tebhaga Movement took place in the entire Islampur Subdivision separately. Bacha Munshi's contribution to the Tebhaga Movement was Undeniable.

The leaders of the Tebhaga Movement in Islampur subdivision were from the Socialist and Congress parties. Islampur Subdivision was particularly influenced by the socialist party of India and Congress party of India during the Tebhaga Movement. At the time, Socialist party organisations were formed in Kishanganj, Islampur and Chopra police stations. Members of this organisation started a massive Tebhaga Movement in Chopra Police station under the leadership of Bacha Munshi. First, Bacha Munshi mobilised peasants in the Boda Police station of Bangladesh and strengthen the Tebhaga Movement. Also, Dr. Samsuddin Ahmed(Amtala), Golam Rabbani(Dhande Gach), Abdul Alim(Dhande Gach), Mainuddin (Guabari), Majiruddin(Asharubasti) etc. participated in Tebhaga Movement in the Chopra police station. The Indian National Congress was already strong in the Islampur subdivision. The Tebhaga Movement took a large form in the town of Islampur. Vidhu Bhushan Nath of Nandoi village led the Tebhaga Movement in Islampur town. Vidhu Bhushan Nath was associated with the Congress party for a long time. Haji Abdul Gani of Baropatna village of Goalpokhar police station inspired the Tebhaga Movement. He motivated the villagers to participate in the Tebhaga Movement. Panchkari Mandol was the foremost leader of the Tebhaga Movement. The Tebhaga

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)

Movement was going on in many parts of this area. The Jotdars of Goalpokhar, Islampur and Chopra police station hired gangster to help suppress the Tebhaga Movement in east Dinajpur. The role of the Communist party in the Tebhaga Movement of Undivided Dinajpur was immense.

Conclusion

Islampur Subdivision has had a distinct history. Islampur subdivision was a border area of Bengal. The Congress party of India and the Socialist party had particular influence in this area. The contribution of the people in this area to the freedom movement of India was immense. As in other districts of Bengal, the Tebhaga Movement took place on a large scale in the Islampur subdivision. The Tebhaga Movement was led by members of the Indian National Congress and the Socialist party in this area. The Tebhaga Movement of entire Bengal was led by members of the Communist party. It was the Tebhaga Movement that paved the way for the establishment of the undivided Communist party in Islampur. Undivided Communist party was formed in Islampur in 1958 AD.

Notes and References

1. Chaudhary, P.C. Roy, *Bihar District Gazetteers Purnea*, Patna: The Superintendent Secretariat Press, 1963, pp.99-100.
2. Ibid, p.-102
3. Malley, L.S.S.O', *Bengal District Gazetteers Purnea*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1911, p.33.
4. Ibid, p.89.
5. Buchanan, Francis, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809-10*, the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1928, pp.484-485.
6. Alam, Pasarul, *Islampur Na Ishwarpur ? A Collection of Essays On Socio-Cultural History of Islampur*, Sahajpath Publication, 2019, p.30.
7. Ibid, p.49.
8. Ibid, p.66.
9. Ibid, pp.82-84.
10. Sen, Partha, *Coochbihar-Dinajpur: Itihas Samaj Sanskriti*, Kolkata: Gita Printers, 2023, pp.66-69.
11. Ibid, p.170.
12. Ibid, p.360.
13. Ghosh, Brindaban, *Uttar Dinajpurer Swadhinata Sangramider Jiban Katha*, Kolkata: International Book Service, 2013, pp.37-38.
14. Ibid, pp.144-145.
15. Ibid, p.156.
16. Ghosh, Brindaban, *Itihas O Sanskritir Aaloke Jagtagaon, An exclusive Compilation of Dissertation*, Diganto Publication, 2022, pp.14-16.
17. Ghosh, Brindaban, *Uttar Dinajpurer Purakirti*, University of North Bengal, 2020, pp.74-77

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Surjapuri Peasants and Their Movement : A Case Study in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District (1938-1946 AD)

18. Ibid, pp.79-81.

19. Ibid, p.83.

20. Ibid, pp.99-100.

21. Ibid, p.p.-103-105

22. Ibid, p.118.

23. Ibid, pp.123-125.

24. Roy, Basudev, *Islampurer Sahityangan O Ratna Chaturshtoy*, Literary Field of Islampur and Four Jewels, Sahajpath Publication, 2015, pp.9-10.