

# The Legacy of Women's Participation in the Tebhaga Movement: Its Impact on Women's Empowerment and Rural Politics in West Bengal

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**Abstract:** *The Tebhaga Movement (1946–1947) occupies a significant place in the agrarian history of Bengal as one of the most influential peasant struggles against the exploitative sharecropping system. While historians have extensively examined its economic and political dimensions, the role played by rural women has only recently gained scholarly attention. Women not only participated as supporters of the movement but also emerged as organisers, defenders of peasant communities, and political activists who challenged entrenched patriarchal norms. Their involvement transformed the movement into a broader social struggle that extended beyond demands for agrarian reform.*

*This article examines the long-term legacy of women's participation in the Tebhaga Movement and evaluates its contribution to women's empowerment and rural politics in West Bengal. Using a socio-historical approach, the study argues that women's activism during the movement laid the foundation for their increased participation in local governance, peasant organizations, social movements, and community leadership after Independence. Although structural inequalities based on gender, caste, and class persisted, the Tebhaga experience significantly altered rural political culture by creating opportunities for women's collective action and leadership. The article concludes that the legacy of the Tebhaga Movement continues to influence contemporary rural women's organizations and democratic participation in West Bengal.*

**Keywords:** Tebhaga Movement, Women, Empowerment, Rural Politics, Sharecroppers, Bengal, Peasant Movement, Gender.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The history of India's freedom struggle includes numerous peasant movements that challenged colonial exploitation and feudal oppression. Among these, the Tebhaga Movement of 1946–1947 stands out as one of the most organized agrarian struggles led primarily by sharecroppers (bargadars) demanding two-thirds of the harvested crop instead of the customary one-half appropriated by landlords or *jotedars*. Organized largely under the leadership of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, the movement spread across several districts of Bengal, including Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Khulna, Midnapore, and 24 Parganas.

The movement represented not merely an economic protest but a wider social revolution involving marginalized peasants, agricultural labourers, tribal communities, and women. Rural women emerged as active participants despite severe social restrictions that traditionally confined them to domestic responsibilities. They mobilized village communities, guarded harvested crops, resisted police raids, organized demonstrations, carried messages between villages, supplied food to activists, and directly confronted landlords and colonial authorities.

Women's participation fundamentally challenged traditional gender roles in rural Bengal. For many women, the movement became their first experience of organized political participation and collective resistance. The courage

displayed by these women inspired future generations of rural activists and contributed significantly to changing perceptions regarding women's role in public life.

Today, the legacy of women's participation in the Tebhaga Movement remains visible in rural political institutions, women's organizations, self-help groups, Panchayati Raj institutions, and grassroots social movements across West Bengal.

## **II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: AGRARIAN EXPLOITATION AND THE RISE OF THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT**

The farming economy of Bengal under British rule was very unfair. A law called the Permanent Settlement of 1793 gave too much power to rich landlords named zamindars. At the same time, it made poor farmers very weak. Under the sharecropping system, called adhi or barga, poor peasants worked on land owned by rich landlords or jotedars. The rules forced these poor sharecroppers to give away half of their harvested crops to the owners. This system kept the farmers very poor and dependent on landlords, which slowly made the people very angry.

Life became much harder during World War II and the terrible Bengal Famine of 1943. The hunger started in rice-growing areas like Rangpur, Mymensingh, Backarganj, Chittagong, Noakhali, and Tipperah. By July 1943, people were dying across almost all of Bengal. A big storm in 1942 ruined crops in Midnapur and 24-Parganas. Crops also failed completely in Murshidabad, Nadia, and Howrah. About 100,000 starving people went to Calcutta by October. The Famine Commission said the main causes were bad weather, crop disease, stopped rice imports from Burma in April 1942, and the British policy of destroying boats and rice. This famine killed 1.5 million people.

In 1940, a group called the Floud Commission suggested that sharecroppers should keep two-thirds of their crops because the farmers paid for all the farming tools. But the rich landlords refused to accept this idea. Because the landlords refused and the peasants were very angry, the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha started the Tebhaga Movement in September 1946. The farmers shouted the famous slogan "Adhi Noi, Tebhaga Chai," which means "Not Half, We Demand Two-Thirds." The protest spread very fast to places like Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Medinipur, 24 Parganas, and Khulna. The sharecroppers took the crops to their own yards.

The movement quickly became a big fight against British rule and unfair landlords. In a place called Debiganj in Jalpaiguri, the men were afraid to cut the crops. Then, a brave old Rajbansi widow, known as "old mother," led a group of women into the fields. Seeing the women, the men joined them to cut the rice. In Pachagarh, Charu Majumdar became a well-known local leader. In southern areas like Kakdwip and Mathurapur, small landlords gave up, but big landlords fought back after a new Bargadars Bill was published. By February 1947, outside leaders helped thousands of farmers in Sandeshkhali take their crops.

Before this movement, poor village women in Bengal had a very hard life. They had no rights to own land, no education, and they depended completely on men. Women from tribal and lower caste groups like Mahato, Colkamar, and Santal did heavy farm work without any respect. Rajbansi, Polia, and Mali women also worked hard but faced strict social rules. After the famine, many women had to work as daily laborers for very low wages. They were trapped by a bad loan system called Dadan. They took loans in difficult times and were forced to work long hours during harvest season for very little money.

Worst of all, the rich landlords and moneylenders physically and sexually abused these poor peasant women. If a farmer could not pay rent or died, the landlords took his wife and children to the estate office, called kachari, and tortured them. The landlords even controlled the marriages of the poor peasants and abused the young brides on their wedding nights. Because of extreme poverty and unpaid loans, sad parents were often forced to sell their daughters to moneylenders. Because they suffered the most from hunger and abuse, these brave women became important leaders when the Tebhaga Movement started.

### **III. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION DURING THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT**

Women's participation extended beyond supportive domestic activities. They actively engaged in:

#### **3.1 Organizing Peasant Meetings**

Peasant women were highly organized during the Tebhaga movement. Every village formed a Mahila Samiti. These groups organized regular weekly meetings. Rural women gathered to discuss their social status and rights. They discussed domestic violence and patriarchal oppression. In 1945, thousands of tribal women attended the All India Peasant Conference in Netrakona, Mymensingh. In 1944, women prepared for the Setabganj Conference and demanded membership. Women mobilized neighboring villages through these meetings. They spread political messages to hesitant peasants. These meetings grew community networks and increased the dignity of women in rural societies.

#### **3.2 Protecting Harvested Crops from Seizure**

Women formed fighting units to protect harvested crops from landlords. On December 15, 1946, women in Debiganj stood in the front row during harvesting. On January 3, 1947, in Atwari, women guarded fields with axes and sickles. They broke five to six police rifles. In Nandigram, Bimala Maji organized women to throw chili-salt powder at the police to protect crops. On December 15, 1948, a pregnant woman named Pakhi protected the harvest in Budhakhali. On September 9, 1949, in Hatla, landlords tried to seize crops. Women resisted them, and the police killed eight peasant women.

#### **3.3 Forming Volunteer Squads**

Peasant women formed formidable volunteer squads called Nari Bahini. These semi-militant squads defended captured lands with household tools. The volunteers of Mahila Samiti arrested abusive husbands and held public trials. In Guakhol village, Saralabala Pal formed a Broom Force of 250 to 300 women. Rangpur women formed the Gain Bahini to drive away police. On February 20, 1947, Jasodaraoni Sarkar led a volunteer force in Khapur. The police opened fire and killed many activists. These squads gave leadership roles to underprivileged women. They became the most fighting part of the rural working class.

#### **3.4 Resisting Eviction by Landlords**

Women actively resisted evictions by landlords to secure their land rights. They fought against the armed thugs of zamindars and jotedars. In Dinajpur and Rangpur, women physically blocked these thugs to protect lands. During the 1945–1946 Hajong rebellion, the Susang zamindari and British police attacked peasants. Mata Rasamani led a group to resist this oppression. On January 31, 1946, soldiers attacked Baheratali village. Rasamani led 35 heroes to fight the soldiers. This resistance helped to end the oppressive Tonk system. Women fought for their economic independence and land rights.

#### **3.5 Participating in Protest Marches**

Protest marches were a key part of grassroots activism. In 1944, peasant women marched to the Kisan Sabha office for membership. Thousands of women later marched to the town to protest arrests. They surrounded the bungalow of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate to demand bail for male peasants. Women also organized singing squads at marketplaces. They played the dotara and sang political songs to build awareness. These marches and cultural campaigns changed public opinion. They created a massive cultural awakening. Women used these protest marches to strengthen the base of the entire movement.

#### **3.6 Serving as Couriers for Movement Leaders**

Female activists served as vital couriers during the uprising. They bypassed state authorities to relay important messages. In Sundardighi, Punyeshwari Barman guided women to pass secret information during meetings. Women monitored enemy movements to protect activists. They blew conch shells and beat brass gongs to warn villages of police raids. In Ranisankail, Comrade Bhaguni led women to confiscate a police rifle. Women used household tools to block police paths. Their courier networks and warning signals reduced the power of state repression. They successfully guided underground fighters away from danger.

#### **3.7 Providing Food and Shelter to Activists**

Women provided essential logistical support to the movement. They provided daily food and shelter for underground male leaders. In Kakdip, a peasant mother saved leader Hemant Ghoshal by hiding him in a bed. The Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti organized community food distribution. Women also provided medical help to injured protesters. In

Jalpaiguri, peasant women ignored threats to arrange treatment for injured leader Madhab Datta. Women looked after activists during times of severe state terror. Their homes became safe shelters for the fighters. This support kept the class struggle alive.

### **3.8 Confronting Police Repression**

Peasant women courageously confronted intense police repression and state violence. They frequently stood at the very front lines during demonstrations because colonial police forces were initially reluctant to use violence against female protesters. However, as the movement intensified, this reluctance faded. Many women endured mass arrests, severe physical assault, imprisonment, and harsh social ostracism for their activism. On January 4, 1947, in Chirir Bandar, armed police fired indiscriminately, causing fatal casualties. Despite witnessing brutal acts—such as the attack on a pregnant woman in Budhakali on December 15, 1948—women continued to form human barricades to protect their communities from state terror.

### **3.9 Overcoming Fear and Challenging Patriarchal Restrictions**

Participation in collective action encouraged rural women to overcome deep-seated fear and challenge traditional patriarchal restrictions. Historically confined to domestic spaces, these women radically transformed into frontline fighters. By organizing public trials against abusive husbands through the Mahila Samiti, they directly dismantled domestic tyranny. Furthermore, their economic activism forced the Party to recognize "Stridhan" in Rajbanshi regions, ensuring men could not seize women's small market earnings. Through these battles, rural women increasingly viewed themselves as powerful political actors who were fully capable of influencing community affairs, achieving literacy, and permanently changing the social landscape.

## **IV. TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL POSITION**

The Tebhaga Movement brought significant changes to women's social identity,

### **4.1 Development of Political Consciousness**

Political participation introduced rural women to ideas of justice, equality, collective organization, and democratic rights. Many women who had never attended public meetings became active members of village committees and peasant organisations. In 1945, thousands of tribal women attended the All India Peasant Conference in Netrakona, Mymensingh. In 1944, local peasant women marched to the Kisan Sabha office during the Setabganj Conference to demand membership. These women regularly attended secret night meetings and mass public gatherings. Peasant worker Bhuteshwari organized door-to-door campaigns to enroll women. This foundational political awareness gave them the confidence to step forward and support the crop-sharing struggle.

### **4.2 Increased Public Visibility**

Traditional norms limiting women's mobility weakened as they participated in protests, negotiations, and village meetings. Women were recognised as contributors to community welfare rather than solely as domestic caregivers. They shattered traditional restrictions on female mobility and purdah by traveling across districts. Women proudly carried Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's "Barnaparichay" book to achieve literacy. In local courts, women like the wife of a peasant protected by other female activists after a domestic dispute openly spoke against wife-beating. This frontline visibility changed how society viewed them, shifting their image from secluded housewives to bold, public defenders of their community.

### **4.3 Growth of Collective Identity**

Women developed solidarity across villages through shared experiences of struggle. This collective identity later strengthened women's participation in subsequent social movements. Highly organized actions dissolved long-standing social divisions among the rural population. Scheduled Caste, tribal, Rajbansi, and Polia women united seamlessly to form the Nari Bahini. This collective participation broke down rigid societal boundaries. Women like Rohini Barman, Jaymoni Barman, and the Borgo-Kshatriya women fought together. By forming unified groups like the Mahila Samiti, they built a lasting sisterhood. This powerful collective bond laid the groundwork for future agrarian reforms and subsequent democratic movements in Bengal.

#### **4.4 Emergence of Leadership**

Several women became respected local leaders who inspired others to challenge gender discrimination and social injustice. Organic leadership emerged directly from the peasantry. Respected figures like Punyeshwari Barman (Burima) in Sundardighi, Comrade Bhaguni in Ranisankail, Saralabala Pal in Guakhol, and Bimala Maji in Nandigram led fierce resistances. On January 31, 1946, Veer Mata Rasamani led 35 heroes at the Battle of Baheratali against oppressive British forces. On February 20, 1947, Jasodaraoni Sarkar led a volunteer force and became the first martyr in Khapur. These grassroots female leaders proved that rural women were fully capable of political leadership and organizational governance.

### **V. CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

Women's empowerment refers to expanding women's ability to make decisions, exercise agency, and participate equally in social, political, and economic life.

#### **5.1 The Political Empowerment of the Tebhaga Movement**

The Tebhaga movement served as a radical catalyst for rural women, transforming them from marginalized agrarian laborers into formidable political agents. By shattering traditional patriarchal and feudal boundaries, this grassroots mobilization laid the foundational groundwork for women's lifelong political activism and institutional representation across South Asia.

#### **5.2 Members of Village Committees**

The Tebhaga movement fundamentally restructured village power dynamics by thrusting women into local governance roles. Having successfully managed community logistics, self-defense networks, and peasant courts during the agitation, these resilient women refused to return to passive domesticity. They transitioned directly into active members of grassroots village committees. In these newly formed spaces, they utilized their wartime organizational skills to debate local policies, manage community resources, and ensure that the voices of peasant families were directly represented in daily administrative decisions.

#### **5.3 Leaders of Peasant Organizations**

By dismantling the notion that agrarian politics belonged solely to men, the Tebhaga struggle served as a vital training ground for female leadership. Women who had once stood on the front lines against oppressive jotedars seamlessly stepped into formal executive roles within regional and state-level peasant organizations, such as the Kisan Sabha. As recognized leaders, they spearheaded subsequent agitations for land reforms, negotiated fair wages for agricultural laborers, and ensured that gender-specific agrarian grievances remained a priority on the mainstream political agenda.

#### **5.4 Activists in Women's Organizations**

The fierce solidarity forged during the 1946 uprising breathed new life into the region's feminist landscape. Veterans of the movement channeled their radical energy into formal entities like the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti and various post-independence women's rights groups. Operating as seasoned activists, they expanded their crusade beyond agrarian rights to tackle widespread social evils. They organized systemic campaigns against domestic violence, fought for equal matrimonial property rights, and established widespread educational networks to permanently liberate rural women from systemic marginalization.

#### **5.5 Participants in Electoral Politics**

The immense public visibility gained by women during the mass rallies and Nari Bahini resistances completely shattered the traditional boundaries of the purdah. This profound shift catalyzed their entry into mainstream electoral politics in both West Bengal and Bangladesh. Empowered by their newfound public identity, former peasant rebels successfully transitioned into political candidates, campaign managers, and astute strategists. They contested legislative elections, mobilized massive rural voting blocs, and injected grassroots agrarian issues directly into the highest halls of state governance.

#### **5.6 Panchayat Representatives**

When local self-governance frameworks were later formalized, the profound groundwork laid by the Tebhaga movement enabled rural women to confidently claim their constitutional space. They transitioned from informal community arbiters into formally elected Panchayat representatives. Armed with structural agency, these women took

charge of local development budgets, spearheaded village infrastructure projects, and implemented crucial social welfare schemes. Their visible leadership in local bodies permanently altered the rural political hierarchy, proving that women could successfully govern entire rural communities.

### **5.7 Economic Empowerment**

The Tebhaga movement (1946–1947) was a milestone for the economic empowerment of rural women in Bengal. Peasant women faced severe economic exploitation from Jotedars and Zamindars, who stole half of their produced crops and forced them into unpaid domestic labor. This movement forced society to recognize women's heavy agricultural labor as vital economic work with financial value. The Mahila Atmaraksha Samity (M.A.S.) actively worked to increase women's purchasing power and independent income. They established independent production centers for knitting, doll-making, and paddy-breaking, which turned marginalized rural women into financially self-reliant economic agents.

### **5.8 Agricultural Rights**

During the 1946-1947 Tebhaga movement, sharecroppers demanded a reduction in the landlord's harvest share from 50% to 33%. Through this economic struggle, rural women realized they had direct financial rights to the food they grew. Landlords exploited women by seizing half the harvest and making peasants bear all operational expenses. Leaders like Rani Mitra Dasgupta and Swarajdini Sarkar of the M.A.S. in Dinajpur educated women about their economic rights. Despite social opposition, women like Kamini Bala Barmani attended secret meetings to claim their legitimate financial share of the agricultural yields.

### **5.9 Household Economic Management**

The Tebhaga movement helped women break domestic isolation and take complete control of storing and dividing the family harvest. They became key economic managers of household resources and crop stocks. Under the M.A.S., ten women's organizations formed a historic women's food association to manage food distribution during crises. While men attended secret political meetings, poor peasant, Scheduled Caste, Rajbansi, Polia, and tribal women managed grain reserves. They protected these economic assets by beating drums and tin jars to stop the police from seizing their food stocks.

### **5.10 Collective Farming Initiatives**

Women protected their economic assets by forming village defense groups called the "Nari Bahini" to guard crops and secure the harvest. In Midnapore, Bimala Mandal led demonstrations to gherao police and harvest crops defiantly to stop financial loss. At Khanpur, Jashoda Barmani attacked a police van with an axe to protect sharecroppers and their crops before being killed. At Hatiar near Bakdi in Jessore, Sarala Bala Pal led women to detain forces and guard their agricultural economy. Front-line fighters like Dipeswari, Bhandani, Jashoda, and Punnyeswari unified women to protect their economic produce from landlords.

### **5.11 Labour Dignity**

The Tebhaga uprising forced society to recognize women's heavy agricultural work as dignified, real labor rather than unpaid domestic help. Women demanded structural respect for their financial contributions to production. In Bogra, an elderly woman named Burima led brave actions against the forces trying to stop their work. At the Neora Majhiali camp in Jalpaiguri, a woman named Poko resisted police intervention to safeguard community labor. A widow from Purushottampur led militant actions armed only with a broomstick, proving that female agrarian laborers were independent economic contributors who demanded work dignity.

### **5.12 Land Reform Policies**

Women's active economic resistance directly influenced institutional land reform policies, leading to legislation like the Bengal Bargadari Act. Leaders like Ila Mitra, the "Rani of Nachole," organized peasants and indigenous Santhals in Rajshahi's Chapai Nawabganj, leading to the historic January 5, 1950 economic uprising in Nachole Upazila. Despite facing brutal torture and life imprisonment at Rajshahi Central Jail, Mitra's sacrifice, along with martyrs like Kaushalya Kamani, Sunima Singh, and Foko Barmani, secured structural rights for sharecroppers. Today, gaining economic strength and financial self-determination remains vital to increasing the status of women.

### **5.13 Social Empowerment**

The Tebhaga movement became a historic milestone for the social empowerment of rural women in Bengal, breaking old patriarchal customs. Peasant women evolved from isolated domestic individuals into a powerful public force. By traveling to protests and forming fighting squads like the Nari Bahini, they challenged landlords, jotedars, and armed forces. This active participation dramatically changed everyday village life, increased their bravery, and altered traditional gender relations within many rural households. Unlike previous movements led by the middle class, Tebhaga saw doubly oppressed rural poor women emerge as courageous leaders of a combined anti-feudal and anti-colonial struggle.

### **5.14 Expanding Mobility**

Women successfully expanded their physical mobility by stepping out of their homes to join the agrarian struggle. Thousands of tribal women traveled far to attend the 1945 All India Peasant Conference in Netrakona, Mymensingh. In 1944, local peasant women marched directly to the Kisan Sabha office during the Setabganj Conference preparations. They moved across villages to run door-to-door campaigns, breaking domestic confinement to build strong social bonds with other women and actively join political gatherings.

### **5.15 Increasing Confidence**

The movement rapidly increased women's inner confidence, enabling them to protect their communities from colonial and feudal terror. In Jalpaiguri, peasant women ignored dangerous threats to arrange medical treatment for the severely injured leader Madhab Datta. In Kakdwip, Sandeshkhali, and Canning, brave peasant mothers confidently hid leader Hemant Ghoshal from arrest. This active resistance against armed landlords and state police gave rural women immense courage and psychological strength to stand firmly on the front lines.

### **5.15 Encouraging Literacy**

Through active political mobilization, peasant women recognized the immense value of education as a powerful tool for true emancipation. Urban women activists and peasant workers like Bhuteshwari organized extensive door-to-door campaigns for the Peasant and Women's Associations. Gaining literacy helped them understand their legal rights and challenge gender discrimination. For example, in Baliadangi of Dinajpur district, Joymoni, a member of the party and leader of the Mahila Samiti, openly protested against her literate husband, Comrade Pastaram, for neglecting her own education.

### **5.16 Promoting Public Speaking**

Women broke their long silence by actively participating in political propaganda and learning to deliver powerful public speeches. Moving beyond passive listeners, they organized mass meetings and disseminated strategic political messages to mobilize neighboring villages. They addressed large crowds to encourage hesitant peasants to join the crop struggle. This public speaking role helped women articulate gendered demands in party meetings, where they broke traditions to openly confront issues like domestic violence, family disputes, and patriarchal control.

### **5.17 Strengthening Social Networks**

Peasant women built highly effective, organized grassroots networks to monitor enemy movements and provide critical warning signals. In Sundardighi, under Punyeshwari Barman (Burima), women secretly passed information during meetings. In Dinajpur, they blew conch shells, beat brass gongs, and chanted slogans to sound alarms. Specialized groups like Saralabala Pal's 250-member "Broom Force" (Jhata Bahini) in Jessore and the "Gain Bahini" in Rangpur proved the power of solidarity, which stopped landlords from abusing village women.

### **5.18 Enhancing Community Respect**

Women earned immense community respect through ultimate self-sacrifice and front-line bravery against state terror. Leaders like the pregnant Jashoda Sarkar in Khanpur and Hajong leader Rasamani in Baheratali sacrificed their lives fighting forces. In Chandanpiri, women like Ahalya Dasi resisted police till death, while five young women became the immortal "Panchakanya of Dubirbheri." By standing as equal partners, they forced men to view them with permanent respect and stopped the widespread sexual exploitation by Jotedars and Zamindars.

### **5.19 Changing Household Gender Relations and Monetary Control**

The movement directly transformed gender relations inside rural households by allowing women to demand strict monetary control and legal rights. Women forcefully placed the demand for Sreedhan on the political agenda. They

asserted their exclusive right to keep all the money earned through their own labor, such as the sale of fruits, eggs, milk, vegetables, and fish from ponds, ensuring male family members had no share in it. Furthermore, they used peasant courts and party meetings to challenge domestic abuse. At a party meeting held at woman comrade Phuleswari's house in Beerganj, Dinajpur, a Krishak Samiti member was tried for beating his wife, forcing him to issue a public apology and pay a fine directly to her.

## **VI. INFLUENCE ON RURAL POLITICS IN WEST BENGAL**

The Tebhaga Movement (1946–1947) fundamentally transformed rural West Bengal by dismantling feudal oppression. Before this peasant uprising, local power belonged entirely to wealthy landlords (Zamindars) and elite men, leaving regular farmers with zero say in land rules. By challenging this autocracy, the movement shifted the balance of power directly to sharecroppers. This transition democratized village politics, as decisions were made by the collective community rather than elite individuals. The rebellion drew poor, Scheduled Caste, Rajbansi, and tribal women into front-line confrontation. Realizing their collective strength, these marginalized groups institutionalized resistance, laying a permanent foundation for future land reforms.

### **6.1 Democratization of Village Politics**

Before Tebhaga, rural political authority largely rested with landlords and elite men. After the movement:

### **6.2 Peasant participation increased**

Before Tebhaga, landlords ruled like corporate bosses, keeping all profits while farmers had zero say. The movement shifted power to regular peasants, who realized their collective strength. Defying elite control, sharecroppers actively entered politics, directly demanding a fairer two-thirds share of the harvest instead of a mere 50% split.

### **6.3 Women's voices gained visibility**

Women evolved from isolated domestic individuals into a unified political force. Activists like Ila Mitra and Rani Mitra Dasgupta expanded women's political arenas. In peasant courts, women boldly articulated demands regarding agricultural rights and labor dignity, while openly fighting systemic domestic abuse, household harassment, and traditional societal seclusion.

### **6.4 Collective decision-making expanded**

The movement replaced autocratic landlord rules with village-wide democracy. Decisions were made collectively by the entire community rather than the elite. This shared authority was exercised through newly established peasant courts and resistance committees, which managed harvest distribution, launched community actions, and enforced social boycotts against abusive, uncooperative husbands.

### **6.5 Grassroots organizations became stronger**

Local organizations like the Kisan Sabha and Mahila Atmaraksha Samity gained immense strength. Women institutionalized resistance by forming Nari Bahini defense corps, using brooms and axes to fight police. This robust grassroots restructuring successfully unified Scheduled Caste, Rajbansi, and tribal peasants, setting the stage for subsequent reforms like Operation Barga.

### **6.6 Strengthening Left Politics**

Former Tebhaga participants, including Scheduled Caste, Rajbansi, and tribal women, remained deeply associated with peasant organizations like the Kisan Sabha after Independence. Activists like Rani Mitra Dasgupta and organizations like Mahila Atmaraksha Samity (M.A.S.) expanded these rural political networks, directly contributing to the historic expansion of left-oriented movements in West Bengal.

### **6.7 Influence on Panchayati Raj**

The political confidence gained through Tebhaga prepared rural women for local self-government. Following constitutional reservations in Panchayats, female representatives drew upon collective activism traditions established by earlier peasant movements. Using bold team skills from the Nari Bahini era, these women confidently speak up and make strong choices for their villages.

### **6.8 Community Leadership: From Resistance to Governance**

The political confidence gained during the historic Tebhaga Movement transformed rural women from front-line fighters into active village administrators. Moving beyond the harvest struggles where they fought for fair crop shares,

they utilized organized networks to spearhead vital literacy drives and public health campaigns. This structural shift enabled women to effectively manage rural development committees.

#### **6.9 Community Leadership: Grassroots Development**

Building on the militant legacy of the Nari Bahini, who originally defended crops with brooms and axes, these female leaders redirected their collective activism toward local welfare. They launched successful anti-liquor movements, established environmental forest protection initiatives, and organized self-help groups. Through these collaborative actions, women secured independent incomes, permanently transforming West Bengal's grassroots leadership.

### **VII. LEGACY IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS**

The Tebhaga Movement fundamentally transformed West Bengal's social landscape, serving as a vital blueprint for modern feminist mobilization. By breaking traditional domestic isolation, early Nari Bahini activists established enduring traditions of collective cooperation. Today, contemporary women's organizations actively draw inspiration from this historic struggle to demand systemic equality across key areas.

#### **7.1 Land rights**

This legacy begins directly on the soil, where modern organizations utilize the Tebhaga spirit to demand equal land ownership. Inspired by the historic fight against oppressive landlords, contemporary movements mobilize poor, Scheduled Caste, and tribal women to claim legal titles. Activists reference the 1946 struggle during agrarian agitations to demand direct land pattas from the West Bengal government.

#### **7.2 Women's inheritance rights**

Securing independent land titles naturally opens the door for women to claim structural asset inheritance. Modern feminist movements advocate for equal rights in parental and ancestral wealth, invoking iconic leaders like Ila Mitra. This ongoing legal battle, championed during post-Independence land reform evaluations, views property ownership as a crucial tool to improve women's independent social positions within villages.

#### **7.3 Agricultural workers' welfare**

Once inheritance rights establish women as rightful landowners, it directly reinforces their demand for agricultural labor dignity. Insisting that society respect farm work, current unions like the Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity fight for equal wages for female daily-wage laborers. These movements demand robust state benefits, explicitly drawing from historical precedents set by the Bengal Bargadari Act.

#### **7.4 Domestic violence prevention**

Achieving dignity and recognition in the fields naturally empowers women to demand safety and respect within their homes. During Tebhaga, women used local peasant courts to openly protest wife-beating and harassment. Today, organizations draw upon this community justice tradition during rural assembly forums, deploying local groups to combat domestic violence and enforce social boycotts against abusive husbands.

#### **7.5 Rural employment**

Ensuring domestic safety remains heavily dependent on achieving economic autonomy, which requires guaranteed rural employment. Mirroring the Mahila Atmaraksha Samity's original argument that independent incomes elevate social status, contemporary movements actively fight for work. Women organize massive demonstrations under the All India Democratic Women's Association to secure livelihood opportunities under the state's Anandadhara portal.

#### **7.6 Food security**

Securing steady employment directly provides the financial resources necessary to dictate a family's daily survival and nutrition. Tebhaga was fundamentally a battle over the right to food as peasants grew, demanding a two-thirds harvest share. Carrying this legacy forward, contemporary women's groups lead grassroots agitations under Kisan Sabha banners to ensure robust public rationing and shield community food supplies.

#### **7.7 Environmental conservation**

Protecting community food supplies is deeply intertwined with safeguarding the natural resources and ecosystems required for agriculture. The historical participation of Santhal and Rajbansi women directly influences modern eco-movements, such as local forest protection campaigns. Today, rural women organize collective initiatives, mirroring the defensive tactics used by historical peasant resistance groups to protect their native lands.

### **7.8 Women's self-help groups**

Defending local environments ultimately fosters sustainable local development, which is achieved through organized, collective community action. West Bengal's contemporary women's networks, mobilized heavily through the Anandadhara Scheme, reflect the institutionalized unity of the old Nari Bahini. By pooling financial resources, rural women use microcredit networks to transform into effective agents of social change.

## **VIII. CONTINUING CHALLENGES IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

While the legacy of the Tebhaga Movement continues to inspire contemporary grassroots movements, rural women in West Bengal still face deeply entrenched structural obstacles. The historical shift in power did not completely eradicate systemic barriers. Today, their path toward absolute empowerment remains an ongoing, contested process across several critical dimensions.

### **8.1 Limited land ownership**

Despite historical precedents like the Bengal Bargadari Act, independent land ownership remains out of reach for most rural women. Without legal titles or official land deeds, they lack the economic autonomy that early Tebhaga activists fought for, keeping them financially dependent on male household members despite their heavy farm labor.

### **8.2 Persistent patriarchy**

Deep-seated gender discrimination continues to heavily restrict women's choices, actively mirroring the feudal mindset they historically resisted. This patriarchal control dictates household decision-making, restricts fair inheritance distribution, limits diverse employment opportunities, and dampens active political participation, proving that social transformation requires more than economic policy changes.

### **8.3 Underrepresentation in historical narratives**

The monumental contributions of front-line fighters remain significantly marginalized or entirely missing from mainstream historical records of the Tebhaga Movement. While iconic leaders like Ila Mitra are recognized, the everyday sacrifices of thousands of Scheduled Caste, Rajbansi, and tribal women are insufficiently documented, obscuring their role as vital history-makers.

### **8.4 Political constraints**

Although constitutional reservations have successfully secured women seats within modern Panchayati Raj institutions, their administrative authority faces severe systemic roadblocks. Active female participation in local governance remains heavily constrained by persistent male dominance within committees, severely limited independent financial resources, and highly unequal access to quality education.

## **IX. LESSONS FROM THE TEBHAGA EXPERIENCE**

The historic peasant uprising offers enduring institutional lessons for contemporary rural development. By analyzing the 1946 struggle, policymakers gain a vital framework for implementing sustainable socio-political changes. The legacy of the movement demonstrates that true empowerment requires a structural approach that addresses multiple layers of rural society simultaneously.

### **9.1 Interconnection of economic justice and gender equality**

Tebhaga proved that economic rights and gender equality cannot be separated. When sharecroppers demanded a two-thirds harvest share, women realized their labor dignity was tied to food security. Modern data shows that giving women asset ownership directly reduces household poverty, confirming that economic policies must explicitly integrate gender rights to succeed.

### **9.2 Rural women as effective political leaders**

Provided with organizational opportunities through the Kisan Sabha, marginalized women quickly transformed into capable leaders. Activists like Ila Mitra and Rani Mitra Dasgupta proved that rural women can run complex political education campaigns. When given structural platforms, they confidently cross domestic thresholds to manage public resistance and village administration.

### **9.3 Collective action and bargaining power**

Isolated individuals cannot break deeply entrenched feudal structures, but collective action radically increases bargaining power. By organizing specialized Nari Bahini defense corps, poor, Scheduled Caste, and tribal women successfully resisted armed police parties. This historical solidarity provides a clear blueprint for modern women's self-help groups pooling resources today.

### **9.4 Grassroots participation and democratic governance**

True democratic governance grows from the bottom up through intense grassroots participation. The establishment of local peasant courts during the movement dismantled autocratic landlord rule, allowing the whole village to make shared decisions. This historical shift directly laid the cultural foundation for the active participation seen in modern Panchayati Raj systems.

### **9.5 Requirements for systemic social transformation**

The movement demonstrates that lasting social transformation requires simultaneous changes across economic, political, and cultural institutions. Challenging the jotedar system was not enough; women had to use peasant courts to fight domestic abuse and societal seclusion. True development policies must simultaneously reform property laws, governance access, and patriarchal cultural norms.

## **X. CONCLUSION**

The legacy of women's participation in the Tebhaga Movement extends far beyond its immediate demand for a greater share of agricultural produce. It marked a decisive turning point in the political and social history of rural Bengal by demonstrating that women were not merely passive victims of agrarian exploitation but active agents of resistance and social change. Through their courage, organizational skills, and collective action, rural women challenged both feudal oppression and patriarchal domination.

Although many structural inequalities persisted after Independence, the movement created new possibilities for women's participation in public life. It fostered political awareness, strengthened community leadership, and encouraged women's involvement in democratic institutions such as Panchayats, peasant organizations, and grassroots development initiatives. The values of solidarity, equality, and collective struggle that emerged during Tebhaga continue to inspire contemporary movements for land rights, gender justice, and rural development.

The experiences of Tebhaga women therefore deserve greater recognition within Indian historiography. Their contributions illustrate that sustainable social transformation requires the active participation of women alongside broader struggles for economic justice and democratic rights. Recognizing this legacy enriches our understanding of both agrarian history and the evolution of women's empowerment in modern India.

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