

Peasant Struggle in Pabna 1872–73

- Sunil Sen

The peasant struggle in Pabna in East Bengal in the year 1872–73 was preceded by the Indigo Revolt of 1859–62 which swept like a tidal wave over Lower Bengal. The Indigo Revolt was mainly directed against the European planters, but the Pabna struggle was fought against the zamindari system itself. The Pabna peasant struggle brought to the fore the horrors of the Permanent Settlement precisely at a time when foreign imperialism and internal reaction were glorifying the new land settlement. The struggle bore such an organised character that it forced the Government of India to take note of the problems created by the Permanent Settlement, the Royal Commission on Famine was instituted in 1880–81, and the Bengal Tenancy Act was passed in 1885.

The peasant struggle in Pabna was rooted in the new land system created by Permanent Settlement, its growing abuse in the hands of the new class of landlords. These “Gentlemen Proprietors”—whom Karl Marx has described as “a group of City Capitalists”—had replaced the old benevolent zamindars. In the two decades between 1850 and 1870 this new class of rapacious landlords had developed into absentee landlords, who became more and more mere rent collectors and did little towards the improvement of agriculture. Henceforth enhancement of rent and imposition of *abwabs* (illegal exactions), became a regular feature.

To what extent the situation had deteriorated was revealed in a contemporary document prepared by “A Native”—who has remained anonymous—and published by the Midnapore Ryots’ Association in 1856. This Ryots’ Association, incidentally, probably was the first peasant association in Bengal. “A Native” writes:

“The right of enhancing rent at will and the consequent fluctuation of tenure as well as the formidable power of dstraint and of compelling the attendance of ryots, nominally for adjustment of accounts, but in reality to increase rent by taking forcibly written engagements, have made the zamindar omnipotent and have reduced the poor cultivator to a degraded state, worse than slavery.

“How shall I describe the thousand wanton atrocities that the zamindars and their myrmidons, encouraged by the inefficiency of the police, commit in moffusil: villages. burnt, crops plundered, ryots put to the most ingenious and cruel tortures?”

— *Tracts: 1848–1856*, A Government of Bengal Publication.

“Villages burnt”, “Crops plundered”, “Ryots put to the most cruel tortures”—this was not only the story of Midnapore in 1856, this was true of other districts of Bengal as well.

This experience of the “Native” of Midnapore is corroborated by L.S.S. O’Malley, Census Superintendent of 1911 and author of many District Gazetteers, who writes in his book *Modern India and the West* published in 1941:

“The Permanent Settlement also failed to give Security to the tenantry.... In 1819 the Directors of the East India Company lamented that the object of the Permanent Settlement, in so far as it concerned the security and happiness of ‘the most numerous and industrious class of the community’, had been so imperfectly attained that instead of their rights being maintained they had not yet been ascertained. Tenants were rack-rented and evicted by their landlords, to whom Government gave extraordinary powers with the two-fold object of safeguarding the revenue and preventing estates being broken up or sold. The landlords were given authority *to evict tenants, distrain and seize their property, and even seize their persons, without recourse to the courts of law.*” (Italics mine.)

—O’Malley, *Modern India and the West*, pp. 705–709.

This open indictment of the Permanent Settlement refutes the arguments of some of our nationalist historians and economists ranging from R.C. Dutt, economist-historian and Congress President in 1890 down to Dr. R.K. Mukherjee, the well-known economist and member of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission, 1940, on the beneficent results of the Permanent Settlement. It is unfortunate that our own economists and public leaders should be the defenders of a system so brutal and iniquitous to the peasantry, which even a British historian like O’Malley could not but indict in unmistakable terms!

Enhancement of rent, evictions, imposition of *abwabs*—these were “the beneficent results” of the Permanent Settlement on the Bengal peasantry. When the peasants failed to meet the demands of the zamindars they were evicted from their land, their crops were plundered and they themselves were taken to the *kutchery* (zamindar’s house) to be beaten up! It was against these conditions that the peasants of Pabna revolted.

The immediate cause of the Pabna revolt was the enhancement of rent from Rs. 1 to Rs. 1-8 per bigha (one-third of an acre).

What was remarkable about the struggle itself was that its strength lay in organisation. Even in those early days the peasants combined in a kind of land league to resist the zamindars’ exactions. They also formulated their demands: No enhancement of rent, No eviction. Their leader was one Ishan Roy, known as “the rebel king” Hindu and Muslim peasants united under this “rebel king”. Ishan Roy was, of course, not a king, but the peasants made him the king, of their struggle. The movement spread to 280 villages, and took the form of refusal to pay rent at enhanced rates and of burning of *kabulyats*, written engagements forcibly taken from them by the landlords. One is reminded of the famous *jacquerie* of the French Revolution.

At the peak of the Pabna struggle came the drama, *Zamindar Darpan* (Mirror of the Zamindary System), written by a village poet, Mir Musharaf Hussain. It was a popular drama written in a language which the peasants could understand, and when it was staged, it so

moved the peasants that they broke into tears and solemnly vowed never to forgive the zamindars.

The nineteenth century intelligentsia was sharply split in their attitude towards this popular struggle.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, hailed as a pioneer of nationalism in Bengali literature, wrote in his paper *Bangadarsan*, condemning the movement:

"We have felt sick and sorry to hear the reports of the oppression of the ryots in the district of Pabna. It is useless to put fire into the frying pan. We advise that the sale and distribution of such a book [the drama, *Zamindar Darpan*] should be stopped at this moment". —*Bangadarsan*, Bhadra, 1280: (Translation mine.)

It is clear that Bankim Chandra; whose song "Vandemataram" became the anthem of the nationalist movement was positively hostile to the peasant struggle which was raging in Pabna. He even suggested that the sale and distribution of a popular drama which moved the people and led them to action should be banned! It is not surprising that this drama by an ordinary village poet, has not been preserved in the face of the hostile attitude of such stalwarts of modern Bengali literature:

Fortunately for Bengal there were people among the intelligentsia who took a different stand. *Somprakash* and *Sadharani*, two Bengali journals of the period, ranged themselves on the side of the Pabna peasants, and in doing so they were only carrying forward the glorious traditions of militant journalism set by the great Harischandra Mukherjee and his *Hindu Patriot* during the days of the Indigo Revolt. Akshay Chandra Sarkar wrote in *Sadharani*:

"The fire lighted by the Pabna peasants is not extinguished, it is burning.... We are for revolution. Revolution alone is the life of society.

".....Witnessing these things [the peasant actions] certain sociologists get alarmed, they shiver. Our hearts are filled with joy, our whole being is electrified." —*Sadharani*, May 9, 1875. (Translation mine)

The Pabna struggle was gathering momentum. Government calculated to put it down with terror. Peasants were arrested and put in jail, suits were brought against them. But the movement continued, and was spreading to the neighbouring districts of Bogra. Not only "certain sociologists" were getting alarmed, even the mighty British Government felt shaky. The Administrative Report of Bengal for 1872-73 referred to it as "a violent and threatening outbreak". At last the Government beat a retreat and passed the Bengal Tenancy Act in 1885. That behind this Act was the agrarian movement of 1872-73 is acknowledged even by the Bengal Land Revenue Commission, 1940, commonly known as the Floud Commission after its Chairman Sir Francis Floud, which refers to this movement as "agrarian outrages". (Bengal Land Revenue Commission, 1940, Vol-I, Section on Early Tenancy Legislation)

The peasants won a partial victory. The Tenancy Act gave tenancy rights to such peasants who held the land for twelve years, and made *abwabs* illegal.

The Pabna peasants' struggle marks the end of an epoch in the history of Bengal, an epoch that saw a series of peasant revolts. The Kule outbreak of 1831-32; the struggle led by Titi Mir in Baraset in 1831, and by Didu Mir in Faridpur in 1847 during the Wahabi movement; the Santal insurrection of 1855; and the Indigo Revolt of 1859-60. To the peasants must go the glory of heading militant struggles, sometimes assuming the nature of armed rebellion, against British domination and the feudal landlords whom the British had set up under the hated Permanent Settlement. The popular upsurge swept the countryside. A section of the new intelligentsia lent their support to these struggles. Popular journals took up their cause.

The ruling class read the writing on the wall. The situation was getting out of control. In 1878, exactly five years after the Pabna struggle, the Press Act gagging the Vernacular Press and the Arms Act prohibiting the keeping of arms by Indians were passed.

The British Government also tried to rally a section of the people behind them and isolate the militant peasantry. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was formed by an Englishman, Allan Octavian Hume, whose own conception of the role of the Congress is revealed in the following line's:

"A safety-valve for the escape of great and growing forces, generated by our own action, was urgently needed and no more efficacious safety-valve than our Congress movement could possibly be devised". —Wedderburn, *Allan Octavian Hume*.

These calculations of British imperialists were no doubt upset in the decades to come, when the Indian kisan fought in the national struggle even under the leadership of the Congress. And today with the Congress leadership going back to collaboration with imperialism (Shades of Hume!) the Indian kisan together with all the toiling millions is again in the forefront of the battle for liberation from the feudal yoke and British stranglehold.

To every fighter of today the Pabna rising of 1872-73, thus stands as a magnificent inspiration, showing up how our forefathers fought the same enemy eighty years ago.

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