Chapter V

The Origin and Development of the Peasant Organisation in the 24-Parganas

It has already been stated that at the outset of the 20th century, the peasants of the 24-Parganas occasionally fought pitched battles with the lotdars. The issues were forcible eviction of bargadars and quick transformation of their lands into khas possessions of the zamindars, illegal exactions and violation of the honour of peasant women.  

The Jute Workers’ Association of Bhatpara (Jagatdal), under the initiative of ex-detenu Kalidas Bhattacharya and communist leaders Shibnath Banerjee, Soumendranath Tagore and Siddheswar Chatterjee of Calcutta, organised the labour in several jute mills and formed labour unions. They intended to start a similar union among the workers of the Kanchrapara Railway workshop, but apprehending that the railway authorities might stand against their attempt unless convinced that the union would be conducted on proper lines, they, through their leaders, enlisted the co-operation of K.C. Roy Choudhury, Moulavi Latafat Hossain, MLCs nominated by the government and others interested in labour issues. On 3 April 1927, Anukul Mukharji of Kanchrapara convened a meeting of the workers in which the persons named above were invited. These gentlemen after consulting the superintendent of the workshop who agreed to the proposal of the initiators, formed the Kanchrapara Labour Union with the following office bearers: president – K.C. Roy Choudhury, vice-president – Moulavi Latafat Hossain, secretary – Anukul Mukharji.

On 16 April, Mukharji with Shibnath Banerjee, Kalidas Bhattacharya and Nirmal Chatterjee visited Kanchrapara and held a private conference with Rudol Singh and some sardars of the workshop at the former’s house. Singh was an influential man and took prominent part during the Kanchrapara workshop strike in 1921.

They explained to Singh and others that their object of putting men like K.C. Roy Choudhury and Latafat Hossain, whom they described as government spies, was only to allay suspicion and obtain favour from the authorities. They would accept the lead of such men nominally and would not abide by their instructions but would act on their own lines. They asked Singh and others to help their cause, which they promised.

From secret information, the IB inferred that “this union will practically be conducted by these communist leaders and may give immense trouble”. In this way, the seed of the Communist Party was sown in the 24-Parganas.

The temporary committee of 24-Parganas Krishak Sangha was formed later. It was decided that a regular committee would be formed talking representatives from the subdivisions. On this occasion a large meeting of the peasants and the labourers was held on 2 September 1928 near Baguihati and 100 representatives of Krishak Sabha were present there. Muzaffar Ahmad, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Dharani Goswani, Kali Kumar Sen and some members of Young Comrade League addressed the meeting.

Even before the formation of the BPKS, the peasants of south 24-Parganas formed local Krishak Samities in their areas and fought against the oppressive landlords and moneylenders. On 14 February 1932, the peasants of Hasnabad (Basirhat
subdivision) assembled at the local bazar to observe a ‘Peasants Day’. Police fired on the rally and killed five cultivators. Many others were injured. The martyrs were: Janab Ali, Salimuddin (Hasnabad), Chand Mia, Samiruddin and Makram Ali.  

Anurup Sen, one of the main organisers of Chittagong Revolutionary Party, came as a teacher to a school of Burul village in the Budge Budge police station area (now under Nodakhali PS) in 1922. He established a secret revolutionary party with the local youths. The members of this secret organisation led the freedom movement in the later period and after that they took the main role to establish peasant organisation in the subdivision. Anurup Sen’s students Pravas Roy and Jyotis Roy took the membership of the Communist Party and led the historical Tebhaga Movement in the 24-Parganas including Kakdwip. 

The workers of factories of Budge Budge, Garden Reach and Metiabruz used to go to the villages and meetings with the peasants. Nityananda Chowdhury was their leader. The activities spread to Falta, Kakdwip, Sagar, Haroa, Canning, Sandeshkhali, Mina Khan, Hingalganj, etc. Nityananda Chowdhury, Hemanta Ghoshal and their comrades devoted themselves to organising peasant movements in Moticha, Gadamara, Harinhata, Srikrishnapur, Bergum, Khaturia under Amdanga police station areas. 

In 1934-35 an agitation of the sharecroppers took place in a large area of Kakdwip-Sagar from Lot No.1 to Lot No.13. The agitators were protesting against the extortion of abwab by the zamindars from the sharecroppers. The sharecroppers raised the slogans: “Baje adai dibona (We shall not give extra payment),” “Khamar chhiloni dibona (We shall not give farm cleaning charge),” “Daroani dibona (We shall not pay for the guards),” and “Bhag selami dibona (We shall not give selami for sharecropping).”

**Loan Mutual Board**

The Bengal Peasants Loanee Act was passed in 1936. Under the Act, the local influential persons selected by the government were given the power of adjudication and the Board was given the power of postponing the issue of decree. It benefited the indebted peasants. The collection of loan was postponed and loan repayment was allowed in long-term instalments. The activity of the Krishak Sabha helped many indebted peasants in this urgent and important matter and as a result its influence spread far and wide. 

By 1936, the Krishak Sabha mobilised peasants in the district of 24-Parganas against the landlords who ejected a number of poor cultivators from their homestead and cultivated lands by civil suit for the failure to pay up their arrear rent and converted their lands into khas (own possession). In Basirhat, Hasnabad, Sandeshkhali, Haroa and Canning police station areas, a large number of peasants were evicted and there was widespread discontent over the cultivation of khas land in the district of 24-Parganas. 

In that year, the peasants of Daudpur in Sandeshkhali attacked the cutchery of the local zamindar, killed the naib (manager) and burned all documents. The government quickly interfered and Umasankar Maity, the local peasant leader, died in an encounter with the police. 

In Bengal, from the late 1930s, peasants were mobilised through the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (formed in 1936) to resist the atrocities of the landlords. The gradual increase in the membership of the Sabha bears an eloquent testimony to its
influence on the peasants of Bengal. This would be evident from our study of the evolution of the provincial Kisan Sabha in Table 1.\textsuperscript{12}

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No. &amp; Place</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>President &amp; Parishad</th>
<th>General Secretary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Provincial Conference, Patrasayar</td>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>27-28 March 1937</td>
<td>11,080</td>
<td>Muzaffar Ahmad, Dr Bhupen Datta, N. Datta Majumdar, S. Ahmad Khan, S. N. Majumdar</td>
<td>Bankim Mukherjee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Conference, Bara</td>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>2-3 December 1938</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>M. Ahmad, Dr B. Datta, N.D. Majumdar, B. Mukherjee, A.H. Sarkar</td>
<td>Abdullah Rasul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Conference, Nagharia</td>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>4-6 May 1939</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>M. Ahmad, Dr B. Datta, N.D. Majumdar, B. Mukherjee, A.H. Sarkar</td>
<td>A. Rasul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Conference, Panjia</td>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>8-9 June 1940</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>M. Ahmad, B. Mukherjee, Nauser Ali, Dr B. Datta</td>
<td>A. Rasul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th Conference, Domar</td>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>June 1942</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>M. Ahmad, B. Mukherjee, Nauser Ali, Haji Md Danesh, Promatha Bhoumik</td>
<td>A. Rasul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Conference, Nalitabari</td>
<td>Mymensing</td>
<td>10-12 May 1943</td>
<td>1,24,872</td>
<td>M. Ahmad, B. Mukherjee, Nauser Ali, Haji Md Danesh, Promatha Bhoumik</td>
<td>A. Rasul</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The objectives of the Kisan Sabha according to the B.P.K.S. manifesto were to secure complete freedom from economic exploitation and the achievement of full economic and political power to the peasants and workers. Muzaffar Ahmad in his speech at the first conference of the B.P.K.S. held at Patrasayar, in the district of Bankura on 27 and 28 March 1937 stressed the necessity of class struggle, of organising peasants against all exploiters starting from British imperialism to local zamindar.13

In 1937, Jyotish Roy took over the duty as the office secretary of Krishak Sabha of 24-Parganas district. The workers who were in leading role in the district applied for the Communist Party membership. They were: 1) Prabhas Roy, 2) Gopal Basu, 3) Hemanta Ghoshal, 4) Satya Narayan Chattopadhyay, 5) Prabhas Sarkar, 6) Jyotish Roy and 7) Nandagopal Chattopadhyay.14

In November 1937 the first session of the 24-Parganas district peasant conference was held under the presidency of Abdullah Rasul at Albert Hall, Calcutta. Several speakers addressed the conference, protesting against the ill-treatment meted out to peasants by zamindars.15

In 1937-1938, Bankim Mukherjee, general secretary of the B.P.K.S., stressed the necessity of organising the peasants for nationalisation of land. B.P.K.S. then formed ‘Red Flag Committees’ to launch a strong campaign against the exploiting classes. In November 1937, Bakim Mukharjee sent Nani Sengupta, one of the activists and organisers of the B.P.K.S., to Sandeshkhali and neighbouring villages of 24-Parganas.16

The important movements of 24-Parganas during the 1937–1946 led by the Krishak Sabha were: a) Khas land movement, b) The movement against hat tola or mela tola, (c) 24-Parganas’ Balarampur Kata Khali canal repairing movement, d) Anti-eviction movement and c) Movement to reclaim land from saline water.

a) Khas land movement
The movement for capturing vested land (Khas land movement) was started in 1938. This movement was intensified by the inspiration of Nityananda Chowdhury.
Bankim Mukherjee, Swami Sahajananda Saraswati, Soumendranath Tagore, Niharendu Dutta Majumdar, and others. A meeting of 5,000 peasants was held at Uchildah village under Haroa P.S. It was the first open rally of the B.P.K.S.

The call for capturing vested land was given from that rally. The peasants took oath to protest against the oppression of the zamindars. The fighting peasants under the leadership of Bankim Mukherjee, Mansur Habibullah, Naliniprova Ghose, Soumyendra Nath Tagore, N. Dutta Majumdar, Hemanta Ghosal, Jyotish Roy, Prabhas Roy, Nurul Huda, Monoranjan Sur and Siris Mondol resumed their struggle. For the enthusiastic activities of the Krishak Sabha, the district magistrate of 24-Parganas, Mr Carter came to the cutchery of the Port Canning Company at Minakhan when he came for investigation and wanted to listen to the lecture of the representatives of the sharecroppers. Thousands of sharecroppers protested that investigation could not be done from the pavilion of the zamindar. The paik and barkandaj (guards) of the cutchery pounced on the sharecroppers and in an acute confrontation a zamindar’s man was killed.

The torture of the zamindar and the police stared. A murder case was lodged in the name of Sirish Mondol. The case lingered for a long time but at last the accused had to be discharged for want of witness. In April 1938, the BPKS again brought the helpless peasants from the 24-Parganas to Calcutta in a long procession and marched towards the Bengal Legislative Assembly and demonstrated against the exploitation and oppression of the Port Canning Zamindary Company.

b) The movement against hat tola or mela tola
In the movement against hat tola or mela tola the peasants of 24-Parganas took active part. The local zamindars, talukdars and ijaradars amassed vast wealth by illegal exaction from the local weekly markets or hats. The poor peasants who used to sell their paddy, vegetables, cattle and other necessary commodities had to pay various fees in cash and/or kind. The hat tola movement started in an intensified form at Falta, Bongaon, Gopalnagore, Khatura, Diamond Harbour, Basirhat, Burul and Bishnupur in the district of 24-Parganas. Naliniproba Ghosh, Jyotish Roy, Prabhash Roy, Ajit Ganguly and Hemanta Ghosal led the local peasants in this movement. At Diamond Harbour in 1939-1940 due to the hat tola movement the situation became so tense that the government officials had to intervene and settle the disputes in favour of the peasants.

c) 24-Parganas’ Balarampur Kata Khali repairing movement
The Balarampur Katakhali Canal of Falta P.S. was an important drainage canal. The filling of the canal threatened to destroy not only the crops but also the habitation in the area. The Krishak Samity organised a movement in 1938 for the repair of the canal. Twenty-six affected village took part in this movement.

The office of the Krishak Samity was established at Majlishpur. The house of Debipur’s Charu Das, a teacher of the Dighirpar Primary School, was the secret shelter. Jyotish Roy of Mahirampur was the secretary of the Krishak Samity and Kamalapati Bindu and Aswini Deb Sarkar were the local leaders. Prabhas Roy, Jyotish Roy, Palash Pramanik, Chatiram Mondal and Hemanta Ghosal organised the movement. After many meetings, processions and deputations to T.S. Menon, the then S.D.O of Diamond Harbour, promise was made on behalf of the government to repair the canal, but it was not implemented.
d) Anti-eviction movement

In 1938, anti-eviction movement was started at Brahminchak under Haroa P.S. Indulal Yagnik, leader of All-India Kisan Sabha, addressed a big meeting here. The impact of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia had inspired the people of this area. Communist Party workers Sudhansu Dutta, Haren Banerjee and others took the responsibility of organising the peasants.\(^{25}\)

e) Movement to reclaim land from saline water

The peasants had begun to occupy fishing land individually when the Lot No. 70 of Sundarban was flooded with salt water. The peasants started to drain away the salt water during land measurement. But the landlords tried to terrorise them by arrests with the help of the police and fining the peasants. In 1929-30, the peasants started satyagraha and non co-operation movement unitedly under the leadership of some middle-class leaders, but the zamindars captured the leaders on the pretext of negotiation and got the revolutionary activists arrested. The movement was destroyed by invoking the Act No. 107. However, individual acts of fishing and draining away of salt water continued.

In 1933-34, the peasants again began to forge a unity and prepare for the seizure of land with the help of law. But they were deprived of justice. In 1943-44 there was a comprehensive mass movement here under the leadership of Krishak Samity. During this period Rasbehari Ghosh, Radhaballav Das, Mansur Habib and others led the movement. In 1944, Kachimoddi Fakir, a resident of Vikharati, and others lodged a case in the name of peasants’ rights.\(^{26}\)

In 1945, one of the main waterways for lifting saline water was stopped by building a dam on the canal of Sadarpur under the Krishak Samity. During this period collector of 24-Parganas S.C. Chatterjee (Case No. 70/1944/45 dated 26/04/1945) recommended to the Revenue Board taking steps against the *ijaradars* of Lot No. 70 and 71, the Bhawanipur Landlordship Ltd and lotdar Pareshnath Ghosh, accusing them of violating the conditions of lease. On behalf of the lotdars (Case no.74/1945 dated 12/7/45) commissioner A.S. Hands appealed to the Revenue Board for the restoration of Lot No. 70 and 71 cancelling the lease, countering the recommendation of the collector (Memo No. 1885 L.R., dated 16.7.1945). On 11 January 1946, L.R Fokan, a member of the Revenue Board (Case No. 124/1945) instructed the collector of 24-Parganas to give orders to make Lot No. 70 and 71 vested with the government.\(^{27}\)

On the other hand in 1946 under the leadership of Krishak Samity there was a mass petition to the hakim of the sub-division, K.P. Sen, who gave the order to drain salt water on 21 February enacting 144 against the zamindars for cultivation. Naren Mitra, the president of the Gopalpur union, played a remarkable role in this case. But in the subsequent period the interests of the peasants were not maintained though the period of lease of these lots were over on 31 March.\(^{28}\)

In 1937 after the first provincial conference, Mazaffar Ahmad and Niharendu Dutta Majumdar came to Burul village. It was decided that they would hold meeting in the playground of the village. The main organiser of the meeting were Prabhas Roy and Murari Saran Chakraborty. As the police declared prohibitory orders under Sec. 144 in Burul, the meeting could not be held. By the effort of the organisers the meeting was held at Baidyakhali in the Falta P.S. area on the same day. As Baidyakhali was outside the
Budge Budge P.S area, the police could not prevent the meeting. Soon after the meeting (1938) the peasants and the common people jumped into the movement of canal cutting. The canal cutting movement was the first organised peasant movement in this area.  

In addition to that the zamindar used to fix tax according to his wish on everything from ferry ghat to village market. For dudher khati (storage of milk) and machher khati (storage of fish), one needed to take permission from the naib (manager). The peasants of Hasnabad, Hingalganj, Baruipur, Sonarpur, Maheshtala and Budge Budge organised movement against such practices before the Second World War.

Another incident occurred in 1939, between English zamindar Daniel Hamilton and peasants in Gosaba at Basirhat subdivision. Daniel Hamilton wrote to K.A.L. Hill, the district magistrate of 24-Parganas, “Lawlessness infact increasing in the Basirhat sub-division and nothing being done to stop it--- the whole division from here to Hasnabad was setting with unrest and crops was being looted --- I request to send down here immediately a body of soldiers to preserve law and order.” The most serious incident occurred in February 1939, when the naib of Denial Hamilton’s estate was severely beaten up and two guns were snatched from the cutchery.

Along with the communists some persons sympathetic to the sharecroppers took up the problems of the sharecroppers in different parts of the Sundarban. Soumendra Nath Tagore of RCPI, Congress leader Murari Sharan Chakraborty and the peasant workers of Bolshevik Party were also associated with them.

An IB informant, “T.P.42”, reported on 14.10.1939 that Bhabani Sen visited Kanchrapara on 8.10.1939 and held a secret meeting of the local committees of the Communist Party at which he read out a typed paper of the district committee of the CPI.

Riots broke out due to oppressive behaviours of policemen sent to arrest an “outsider” communist kisan leader, Sudhangshu Dutta, in October 1940. The armed police party was surrounded by an agitated peasant mob of 300. In the violent clashes and police firing that followed, several persons on both sides were seriously injured, and the peasants succeeded in freeing their leader, as well as in capturing police guns and revolvers. The government let loose terrible repression against the peasants. Despite that, the battle for khas land and against eviction of peasants by zamindars continued until 1942-'43, without, however, any significant gain for the peasants.

Kakdwip

Till the third decade of the 20th century, the peasants organisation was not was not established in the Sundarbans area under the then Kakdwip police station. The office of the Krishak Samity was set up in a rented house in Diamond Harbour town in 1940. Jyotish Roy was in the leadership. The Communist Party was banned then. The office of the Krishak Samity was the shelter of the communists. Besides the local workers, Kansari Haldar, Manik Hajra, Sailen Ghosh and others used to come there regularly. Jyotish Roy, Sailen Ghosh, Manik Hajra, Haren Chakroborty and Kansari Haldar were members of the Samity.

The work of establishing peasant organisation in the adjoining villages continued. Dr Bhupendranath Dutta held meetings secretly at Mahisamuri under Diamond Harbour P.S., Sarachi under Magrahat P.S., etc., in the end of the third decade. In 1939, a delegate meeting of the Krishak Sabha was held at Kanpur village, not far
from Diamond Harbour town. Gopal Haldar and Kansari Haldar were the president and chief of the reception committee respectively. A few teachers were also present at the meeting along with the local delegates. In the beginning of the fourth decade, one or two young men of Kakdwrip and Sagar police stations were introduced to the party workers of Diamond Harbour. Two young men of Budhakhali named Jatin Maity and Gunadhar Maity (nephew and maternal uncle) used to come to Diamond Harbour regarding the cases of the local cultivators. Most of the cases were against lotdars/chakdars. The office of the Krishak Samity was adjacent to the court. Those youths used to come to the office of the Krishak Samity seeking suggestions from Jyotish Roy and others. In the words of Gunadhar Maity, “We did not know of communism before that.”

On 15 April 1941, according to a report of Paresh Singh of Faridpur, sent to Santi Mukherji, he along with others had already been recruited into the party. The recruits were willing to help with funds and join the study circle meetings of the party. They also requested for party literature and periodical news bulletins.

**Mather Dighi**

The village of Mather Dighi was at the junction of three police stations: Canning, Sandeshkhali and Haroa. The 24-Parganas district conference of the Communist Party was held at Mather Dighi in 1942 under the leadership of Manikuntala Sen, Nityananda Chowdhury, Bhabani Sen, Bankim Mukherjee, Rasbehari Ghosh, Haridhan Chakraborty and others. The local leaders were Nakuleswar Pramanik, Sailendra Nath Patra, Narendra Nath Sinha, Lalit Kumar Sinha and Parsuram Bhakat of RCPI.

During that period some opportunist jotedars enlisted their names in Krishak Sabha. But under the pressure of the zamindars they left the Krishak Sabha. They were Chandrakanta Patra, Ramanth Kayal, Pundarik Sinha, Ayaj Uddin Sheikh and others.

The outbreak of the Second World War (1939) created a lot of problems. As a result of hoarding and black marketing of food under the nose of the government, the poor people of the 24-Parganas had to suffer most. The boat denial policy of 1942 of the British government in this area had also an adverse affect on the people of Sundarbans. The unprecedented floods and cyclone in October 1942, together with the famine of 1943 virtually depopulated several areas of Midnapore and 24-Parganas districts.

In certain subdivisions of Mymensing, 24-Parganas, Hooghly, Howrah and Khulna, approximately a third of the families either sold or mortgaged their land. A study of destitutes estimated that 4-8 million of the rural poor in 1943-44 lived off charity. Families sold their children. Women and girls turned to prostitution to earn money for food.

As an inevitable consequence of famine, malaria, mall pox, and cholera came in an epidemic form. The death toll exceeded that of the famine. In this context, mention may be made to the report prepared by Lt. Col. K.S Fitch, deputy surgeon general (famine relief), Bengal, about various stages among the worst cases of starvation.

Lt. Col Fitch observed that while famine associated with abnormal living conditions undoubtedly led to very high mortality, in many cases, the complexity of disease made it impossible to distinguish accurately between deaths due solely to lack of
food and deaths in which lack of food was a contributing factor. According to his classification, the deaths occurring during the 12 months were due to:

- solely starvation,
- starvation aggravated by an acute or chronic disease,
- an acute or chronic disease aggravated by starvation, either
  1. from diseases due to condition of living arising during famine, or
  2. from a disease,
- some causes during famine but unconnected with food or famine condition.48

In 1943-Parganas, deaths due to disease, lack of food and related causes numbered three lakhs.49

In 1943 during famine the government bought paddy from other places or rich men. That paddy was given to the poor people on condition that after boiling, drying and husking one sack of paddy (60 kg), the poor man would give the government 40 kg of rice and he himself would take the remaining amount.

The government used to give that rice to the poor people as relief once a week. In Hatgachhi area of Sandeshkhali P.S., relief used to be given at the cutchery of Bhagabati Gol.50 The non-government organisations protested against this policy. The Hindu Mahasabha, Marwary Relief Society, Bengal Relief Committee, Naba Bidhan Relief Committee, Punjab Relief Committee, Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha, etc., stood by the people of Sundarban during the famine.51

The peasants of Kakdwip were also hard-hit by cyclone and famine. It was against this background of natural calamities that Satyanarayan Chatterjee, Jyotish Roy, Kansari Haldar, Manik Hazra, Abdur Razzak Khan and Nityananda Chowdhury came to Kakdwip as members of the People’s Relief Committee for relief work. The relief committee, as a voluntary organisation of the Communist Party, began to mobilise the peasantry politically and organisationally. The Kisan Samity was formed at Budhakhali. Jatin Maity, a peasant activist with a terrorist background, began to organise the peasants of Budhakhali.52

Soumendra Nath Tagore, Bhabani Sen, Manikuntala Sen, Rasbehari Ghosh, Bankim Mukherjee, Naliniprabha Ghosh and Nityananda Chowdhuri came to the area of Mather Dighi to help relief work in 1943. They spread in the areas of Canning, Basanti, Gosaba, Sandeshkhali, etc., in the Sundarbans. They organised a meeting of some farmers through Barun Patra of Mather Dighi) at Brajalal Pramanik’s house. The Krishak Samity was formed from that meeting.53

The office of the Krishak Samity was built at Dr Gagan Roy’s home at Mather Dighi in 1943 under the leadership of Nakuleswar Pramanik. After forming the People’s Relief Committee in that office, clothes, medicines and food were distributed among the poor peasants and the peasants were organised.

This Krishak Samity consisted of the following persons: 1) Nakuleswar Pramanik (secretary), (2) Radhanath Pramanik, (3) Dinanath Pramanik, (4) Dwarik Nath Pramanik, (5) Brajanath Pramanik, (6)Pundarikaksha Pramanik, (7) Bharat Das, (8) Kedar Das, (9) Binanda Kandar.54 After dissolving the old committee, the new committee was constituted. This committee included some other villages also. It comprised Barun Patra as the secretary, Altaf Mollah as the president and Ram Kamal Mondal as the assistant secretary. Dr. Sashikanta Mondal and Parameswer Mondal were also included.55
A public meeting, designated as the Krishak Sabha conference of the district, was held at Mather Dighi village, about 12 miles from Canning at about 6 P.M. on 1 February 1943. The gathering numbered about 2,000 both Hindus and Muslims. Several Krishak Sabha leaders from Calcutta and outside were present. Prominent among them were:

1) Natyananda Chowdhuri
2) Hemanta Ghosal
3) Abdur Rezak Khan
4) Mrs Naliniprabha Ghose
5) Miss Kamala Chatterji
6) Bibhuti Guha (of Dinajpur), and others. The meeting was held in a paddy field where a sort of *pandal* had been put up decorated with placards.\(^{56}\)

At Gosaba in Hamilton’s zamindari, there were some canals. The peasants used to catch fish in those canals. Towards 1943-44 those canals were given on lease to some men depriving the peasants. The peasants revolted against it.\(^{57}\) A movement took place at various villages of Satijelia in 1943-44 demanding the cancellation of the peasants’ wages agreement. A vast area of agricultural land in these places was treated as *khas* land under Hamilton Estate.

The sharecroppers were given land for cultivation under the peasants’ wages agreement. They had to take almost all the paddy to the *cutchery*, leaving a little amount. The employees of the zamindar tried to give the sharecroppers as little as possible after calculating their expenses. At that time the sharecroppers in different places had become vocal on the demand of *tebhaga*. The sharecroppers of Gosaba Hamilton Estate raised the demand that the peasants’ wages agreement must be cancelled and sharecroppers must be given their rights. Ram Krishna Pathak came to their leadership along with Sevak Das and Gajen Maity.\(^{58}\)

The second conference of the Krishak Committee was held on 22-23 July 1944 at Mahirampur village under Falta P.S. Stressing the effectiveness of peasants’ unity, the general secretary’s report mentioned, “Wherever we tried a little, success was seen.”\(^{59}\)

On 15 October 1944, A big conference of the Communist Party of 24-Parganas district was held at the University Institute Hall, Calcutta, with 1,500 activists, sympathisers and supporters. Muzaffar Ahmad, one of the founders of the Communist Party of India, delivered the opening speech desiring the success of the conference. Saroj Mukherjee from the CPI’s Bengal committee and Nityananda Chowdhury, the secretary of its district committee, addressed the conference. Provincial leader Nepal Nag appealed for contributions to the party fund, to which everybody responded heartily. Before the end of the conference, Abdul Halim delivered a speech on behalf of the presidium, calling for sacrifices for the sake of the freedom movement.\(^{60}\)

The district committee of the Kishan Samity of the Communist Party held a peasants’ conference at Budhakhal in 1944. Rezzak Khan, Kansari Haldar, Jyotish Roy and Jyotin Maity delivered lectures at the meeting. Another Kishan Samity was formed at Haripur with Gajen Mali as the president and Balaram the secretary, and 11 others including Khirode Bera, Atul Santra, Ananta Kuiti and Grish Mandal as members. Uniting and organising the peasants (by the Kisan Samity) above caste and communal prejudices was a very difficult task. Besides this there was the problem of allaying the fear of the *lotdar*’s muscle power and the helpless dependence of the peasants on the
economic strength of landlords. Kisan Samities were formed in all unions with five to six activists in each unit to guide the peasants.\textsuperscript{61}

Sharply reacting against the growing unrest and protest of the peasants, so long submissive, Dwarik Samanta took the help of the police to nip the peasant organisation in the bud. To serve the interest of the landlords, the police arrested three sharecroppers involved in the protest movement on charge of dacoity, which, however, could not be established in court. The result was acquittal of the arrested persons and consolidation of the peasant organisation.\textsuperscript{62}

Another factor which had influenced the Kakdwip peasant movement was the impact of the Midnapore salt movement and the heroic mass movement of August 1942. Since most of the peasants of Kakdwip (86 per cent of Budhakali and 60 per cent of Haripur) came from Midnapore, many of them had the experience and background of being involved in movements.\textsuperscript{63}

Leaders from outside began to take charge as the organisation and movement reached a developed stage. The poorer sections of the peasantry played a leading role in the movement. At the initial stage of the movement the Kakdwip peasants had to depend on the financial assistance given by the Communist Party. But with the passage of time, the organisation earned self-sufficiency. Local peasants used to collect 1 to 2 sheers of paddy per bigha as annual subscription for the Kisan Samity.\textsuperscript{64}

In 1945, Jyotish Roy and Gunadhar Maity were going to Lakshmi Janardanpur of Mathurapur to hold a meeting. On their way the jotedar’s men caught them and took them to the cutchery. They were threatened that they would not be able to enter the area and were asked to give undertakings that they would not organise the peasants against the jotedars. But the threat had no result. At last they were stripped and kept seated at the cutchery. Getting the news, the peasants surrounded the cutchery building from all sides.\textsuperscript{65}

A typical peasant rally

Canning, 5 October 1945

Under the auspices of the 24-Parganas district committee of the Communist Party of India, a mass rally was organised on 5 October 1945 near Khelar Math, Canning. The issue was the rampant corruption and irregularities in food and cloth distribution.

Moulana Abdur Rezzak Khan, a prominent peasant leader, presided over the meeting attended by about 1,000 mostly local peasants and workers. He urged the peasants to take a vow that they would continue their agitation till they achieved their goal of Independence. The meeting commenced with a song, “Uraore urdhe lal nishan” (Fly high the red flag), sung by Nityananda Chowdhury.\textsuperscript{66}

The first speaker was Monoranjan Roy,\textsuperscript{67} secretary of the 24-Parganas Krishan Samity. He observed that the distress of the peasants living in the flooded areas was more acute than what they had to suffer during the last famine. They had assembled there to devise some means by which they could compel the government to take adequate steps to remove their sufferings. Many peasants living under Tambuldahar union had often to pass their days without food. During the last Id fasting they were not given enough sugar to quench their thirst. The Muslims could not buy new clothes for their children.
The peasants demanded at least one dhoti or sari for every individual on the occasion of Id and Puja. It had been decided in the last food committee meeting that every union in the villages would receive 18 bales of cloth for distribution to the people, but the unions in Canning had not received any bales.

During the last famine and heavy flood, about 80 per cent of the peasants in Canning were made landless. Now, they had to live entirely on charity and relief dole. Every year the embankment in the area was washed away into the adjacent river causing a havoc. The government should come up with a definite plan to stop this. In the last famine, many people in Canning had become destitute and many women were forced to become prostitutes. The weavers and fishermen were on the verge of starvation for want of yarns and nets.

Roy then stressed the activities and the nature of work done by the Krishak Samity in the area. He appealed to the audience to become members of the Samity, which was the real organ to ventilate the grievances of the peasants and to look after their interests.

The next speaker was Nityananda Chowdhury. He said that if the government was unable to carry out its duty properly and look after the interest of the people, it should transfer the administrative power to the people’s representatives from the Congress, Muslim League and the Communist Party and the Krishak Samity. The food committees in the districts which were not functioning properly should be replaced by new committees composed of members chosen from the public.

Abdul Halim supported the demands raised by Chowdhury. He said that during the last famine in Bengal about three lakh people lost their lives in the 24-Parganas. Demanding the release of political prisoners like Ananta Singh and Ganesh Ghose, he said that they were the fittest persons to stop black-marketing, bribery, etc.

The president, Moulana Abdur Rezzak Khan, said that the day was not far off when the peasants would be able to send some of their own representatives to the new Legislative Assembly. The foremost duty of the kishans was to bring unity amongst themselves and that meant unity amongst the Hindus and Muslims.

The growing organisation and its key leaders

According to an intelligence report on a food and cloth re-organisation conference held under the auspices of the CPI at Baduria Bazar, 24-Parganas, on 19.11.1945, the following were noticed – Abdur Rezzak Khan, Nalini Prava Ghosh, Hemanta Ghoshal, Kansari Haldar and Dharmadas Roy. Hailing from the 24-Parganas, these were some of the prominent leaders of the communist-led peasant movement in Bengal at that time. The increasing influence of the Krishak Sabha among the district’s peasantry would be evident from Table 2.

Table 2
Membership of 24-Parganas District Krishak Sabha, 1938-1945

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1938 (Nov)</th>
<th>1941</th>
<th>1942</th>
<th>1943</th>
<th>1944</th>
<th>1945</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1,724</td>
<td>3,922</td>
<td>10,801</td>
<td>12,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1943, Bibhuti Guha acted as the president of the Krishak Sabha of 24-Parganas. Prabhas Roy, Gopal Basu, Satyanarayan Chatterjee, Haridhan Chakraborty and Rasbehari Ghosh acted as the secretaries of the organisation in the district between 1937 and 1947. The report of a Calcutta Police special branch officer dated 26.06.1946 regarding the Communist Party newspaper *Swadhinata* of that day mentions Abdur Rezzak Khan, president and Rash Behari Ghosh, secretary, of the 24-Parganas district Krishak Samiti. The important district leaders of the 24-Parganas were Rashbehari Ghosh, Joytish Roy and Hemanta Ghoshal. Jatin Maity, Gunadhar Maity and Jagannath Maity were in charge of the Communist Party organisation at Budhakhali, Pathar Pratima and Namkhana under the Kakdwip police station. Sudhanshu Mondol organised the sharecroppers’ movement at Sandel Bill and Dulduli under the Hingalganj police station.

Those who led the peasant movement in Sonarpur were Haridhan Chakraborty, Khagen Roy Chowdhury, Kali Ghosh, Salil Chowdhury, Sontosh Dasgupta, Jagadananda Mukherjee, Shibdas Bhattacharya, etc. Though the movement was centred around Sonarpur, they worked in vast areas of south 24-Parganas. Haridhan Chakraborty organised the peasant movement in Joynagar, Mathurapur, Kakdwip and Canning. Raghu Chakraborty, Dasarathi Basu, Hrishikesh Chakraborty, etc., organised peasant movements in the Rajpur municipal area, Panchghera, Bhabanipur, etc. Salil Chowdhury, who later became a famous composer, organised the movement in Kodalia, Malancha, Mahinagar and other places and composed many songs to inspire the peasants. Santosh Dasgupta co-operated to organise peasants in Sandeskhali.

The most important role was played by the peasants themselves. This grass-roots level leadership sustained the movement like a nursing mother. In this category we can mention the names of Chiyar Shai Shaikh, Baccha Munshi, etc.

At the beginning of 1946, the Krishak Samity was set up in Gobindorampur and its adjoining villages by the efforts of Jatin Maity and Jyotish Roy. A worker of South Bishpur (P.S. Hingalganj) peasant movement, Bibhuti Acharya, was killed by a conspiracy when he was returning from a meeting.

About 200 people attended a CPI meeting on 21 April at the Karbala Maidan, police station Metiabruz, under the chairmanship of Ket Narayan Misir. Speakers urged the audience not to be afraid of the police, but to protest vehemently against police action in arresting some of the workers of the Keshoram Cotton Mills. A peasant convention of Barasat subdivision was held, presided by Abdul Janin, a peasant activist at Gadamara market of Maricha union in the subdivision of Barasat on 14 May 1946. The representatives of Krishak Samity were present at the convention. Thousands of peasants from Maricha, Srikrishnapur, Urali, Raytara, Amoka, Maslandapur, etc., attended the convention. Many resolutions like abolition of zamindari system, writing off of agricultural loans, dredging the Vidyadhar river and the silted canals of Barasat subdivision were taken.

Nityananda Chaudhuri, Abdul Rezzak Khan, Manik Hazra and others of the CPI visited Budhakhali in Kakdwip P.S. on 6 June 1946 and in a mass meeting, in which more than 1,000 peasants participated, explained the significance of the Tebhaga movement. Leaflets under the caption ‘Krishaker Dabi’ (peasants’ demands) were largely distributed. This followed a series of peasant meetings in different places of Kakdwip.
P.S., namely, Ghughudanga, Namkhana, Layaiganj, Maharajganj, Haripur and Frazerganj, also in Patharpuradima, Kaimuri Lot No. XVI in Mathurapur P.S. and Manashadwip in Sagar P.S. CPI members who were identified by the intelligence personnel in connection with these meetings, agitation and propaganda were Sunil Kumar Chatterji (ex-convict in Watson case) Rash Behari Ghosh, secretary, 24-Parganas district Kishan Samity, Kansari Haldar, secretary. Diamond Harbour subdivision Kishan Samity, Jyotish Ch. Roy, president, Diamond Harbour Kishan Samity, Jatin Maity and Jagannath Maity of Budhakhali, P.S. Kakdwip.  

Table 3

List of the famous peasant organisers of 24-Parganas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Father’s name</th>
<th>Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Kansari Haldar</td>
<td>Kalipada</td>
<td>Andharia, Diamond Harbour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Dr. Amar Naskar</td>
<td>Abhay</td>
<td>Bhangar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Gour Mondal</td>
<td>Ramkrishna</td>
<td>Dadpur, Sandeshkali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Sudhansu Dutta</td>
<td>Jadunath</td>
<td>Kamarhati, Harowa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Sudhiranjan Chakraborty</td>
<td>Suresh</td>
<td>Bongaon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Jitendranath Ghosh (Batuk)</td>
<td>Ambika</td>
<td>Dhapdhabi, Gobindapur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Nitai Mondal</td>
<td>Natabar</td>
<td>Bazekhatura, Habra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Debprasad Singha</td>
<td>Nripendra Nath</td>
<td>Dhapdhabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Gostabihari Sarkar</td>
<td>Baradakanta</td>
<td>Nischintapur, Swarupnagar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Narendra Nath Khan</td>
<td>Sasibhushan</td>
<td>Srinathpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Manik Hazra</td>
<td>Bipinbihari</td>
<td>Sarachi, Magrahat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Haridhan Chakraborty</td>
<td>Harendra</td>
<td>Sonarpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Rasbehari Ghosh (Secretary, District Krishak Samiti)</td>
<td>Purna Chandra</td>
<td>Telenipara, Titagarh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Prabhas Roy</td>
<td>Surendra</td>
<td>Burul, Budge Budge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Sunil Chatterjee</td>
<td>Aghor</td>
<td>Gangahat,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the cultural front

Many of the activists, during interviews, have told us that the peasant struggle could not have attained such a peak without the support of a strong cultural front. Talented artistes and composers like Salil Chowdhury enriched the movement with their renditions and compositions. Here, we provide a list of songs that inspired the peasants and the sharecroppers of 24-Parganas to be united against exploitation, injustice and tyranny of the British government, landlords and moneylenders.

1. *Sonar Bangla holo smashan / Duare kanna, ma ektu phaen* (Golden Bengal has become a burial ground / cry at the door, Mother please give a little starch of rice)\(^87\)
2. *Police dekhe bhoy korina / Chole aye* (We’re not afraid of the police, come on)\(^88\)
3. *Hei samalo, rakte bona dhan, moder pran ho* (Save the paddy sown by our blood)\(^89\)

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Hemanta Ghoshal</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
<td>Jaynagar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Jagannath Maity</td>
<td>Satinath</td>
<td>Maheshtala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Gajen Maity</td>
<td>Kamal</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Gosthobihari Naskar</td>
<td>Kedarnath</td>
<td>Maheshtala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Jatin Maity</td>
<td>Dwarknath</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Jatin Roy</td>
<td>Anandaprasad</td>
<td>Maheshtala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Manmatha</td>
<td>Abinash</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Gunadhar Maity</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Ram Mondal</td>
<td>Trailakya</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Jhareswar Manna</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Maheshtala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Hemanta Muniya</td>
<td>Tiru</td>
<td>Kankadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Kumud Sahu</td>
<td>Sukchand</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Bishnupada Sheet</td>
<td>Gopal</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Taharat Sheikh</td>
<td>Feku</td>
<td>Suryakumar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Naliniprova Ghosh’s elder daughter Bina Ghosh’s song: *Ke achho eso go bhakto beer / Danrao uchche tulia shir* (Come on ye brave dedicated souls, stand up with your head held high)*

5. *Akase urchhe Japani biman / Ak sathe tora chal* (Japanese planes are flying in the sky, let us walk together)*

6. *Chashi de tor lal selam, lal nishanre* (Peasants give your red salute to the red flag)*

7. *Sajani ei bela nao Chin-Malayer pather nishani* (O dear take the path of China and Malaysia)*

8. *Dari tiki bhai bhai larair maydane jatibhed nai* (Muslims and Hindus are brothers in the battlefield)*

9. *Hindu Musalman bhai bhai / Mehanati manuser jatived nai* (The Hindu and the Muslims are brothers, there is no difference among the working people)*

10. Little children sang rhymes like *Ani suni bar bina raside maliker dhan nai* (We won’t give any paddy without receipt)*

11. The peasants of Haroa sang *Ebar mora katbo sonar dhan* (Now we will cut the golden paddy)*

12. *Jago majur kishan bhai* (Rise the worker and peasant brothers) – such songs were sung in the processions in villages.*

13. Bairagi of Budhakhali used to sing *Derabare, bakeya sude lutchhere chasir fasal* (By the system of one-and-a-half *abwab* and due interest the landlords are looting the peasants’ crop)*

14. In the air of the Sundarbans a tune floated: *O chasi tor ghare agun baire toofan / Bideshi sarkar ghare, duare dushman / Kishan bhaire kastetare dio jore shan* (O peasants, there is fire in your home and cyclone outside / There’s a foreign government at home and the enemy is at your doorstep / sharpen your sickles)*

15. Posters were pasted on huts with the lines of the song *Banglar buke chasi adhiyar mathe nai tar kono adhikar* (In Bengal there was no right of the peasants and sharecroppers on the land).*

### Arousing Women

The participation of the women in various popular movements of our country is remarkably significant. In our rural economy, women played an important role both in the household and in the agricultural field.*

The rise of the women’s movement came late in the day in this country, although social reform movements, focusing on women’s inferior status and oppression, spread to some parts of India in the second half of the 19th century.* The political history of India took a turn in 1905. The anti-Bengal partition agitation saw an unprecedented mass participation in politics. For the first time women in significant numbers participated in the movement.* From 1920-22 the women began to take part in the Non Co-operation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi.* Early in the 1930s, Gandhi gave a call to the women of the country to take part in the Salt Satyagraha, No Tax Movement and Civil Disobedience Movement. Women took active part in picketing before the shops of foreign goods, manufacturing of salt in violation of section 144 Cr.P.C. and participated in Civil Disobedience Movement in a large scale.* In 1942, the women began to take part in Gandhi-led Quit India Movement.*
The movement for women’s liberation in India transformed itself into a political movement. An analysis of the different phases indicates this process of change. Exclusively as a women’s organisation in 1927 the All India Women’s Conference (ALWC) was formed in order to mobilise Indian women and build a national organisation. The communist-led Mahila Atmaraksha Samity (MAS), formed in 1942, was the most important in terms of linkages with the agrarian movement in Bengal. It is necessary to go back a few years to understand the origins of the organisation. In 1939, the All India Students’ Federation had its national meet in Delhi. One of the issues discussed was the question of release of political prisoners.

In 1940, a Girl Students Conference of the AISF was held in Lucknow. Renu Chakraborty was the president of the conference, inaugurated by Sarojini Naidu. The Girl Students Association was formed at this conference. In 1941, its membership grew to a staggering figure of 50,000.

Mahila Atmaraksha Samity

In April 1942, the organising committee of the Bengal Provincial Mahila Atmaraksha Samity was formed. On 27-28 April 1943, the first conference of the Samity was held at Calcutta Arya Samaj Hall. Mohini Devi was the president. On 8-9 May, the provincial conference of MAS was held in Calcutta. More than 100 representatives from 21 districts of Bengal, including the 24-Parganas, participated. A working committee was formed in this conference, with Indira Devi Chowdhurani as president, D.M. Basu as vice-president, Ela Reed as secretary and Amiya Debi and Manikuntala Sen as assistant secretaries.

In April 1944, by the joint efforts of Bengal Provincial Mahila Atmaraksha Samity (BPMAS), other women’s organisations and welfare organisations, the Nari Seva Sangha (Women’s Welfare Organisation) was formed for the rehabilitation of poor women. On 4-7 May 1944, the second annual conference of MAS was held in Barisal Town. Hajra Begum was elected as the president at the conference. Ela Reed was secretary. Kanak Mukherjee and Suiful Roy were elected as assistant secretaries.

The emergence of MAS, with a registered membership of 43,500 in 1944, was a landmark in the history of people’s movements in Bengal.

On 16-18 November 1945, the third annual conference was held at the University Institute Hall, Calcutta. Jyotirmoyee Ganguly was elected as the president and Ela Reed as the secretary.

The organisation of MAS spread out in the districts with the membership rising to three lakh. The communist women campaigned that the freedom and emancipation of women could not be secured without the political solution of establishing a government which would look after the people’s welfare and interests. To that end they must politically agitate for the release of national leaders. The communist women were in the forefront in alleviating the distress of famine and epidemics which had stricken Bengal; humanitarian work and political work became one and indivisible.

The food crisis gave the women’s movement a new thrust. The food movement and conferences which were organised in the districts from December 1942 saw women of MAS joining in increasing numbers.

Relief work in Calcutta, Pabna, Rangpur, Barisal and Dinajpur was started by women. MAS submitted an appeal to the government with 10,000 signatures asking for
separate control shops for women. As a result of this agitation, eight such shops were opened. MAS also worked for maintaining law and order in these shops. The price of rice rose to Rs 20 in March 1943. MAS organised a hunger march of 5,000 women to the Bidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly). This was the first march of its kind which shook the entire city. At this critical juncture of impending famine, MAS appealed to the women of Bengal to:

a. Unite for protecting their honour  
b. Unite for the sake of their family and home  
c. Unite in the struggle for food  
d. Unite for the sake of their infants who were dying for lack of barley  
e. Unite to save lives of their children  
f. Stand on their own feet through cottage industry  
g. Unite to save the nation.

There was an overwhelming response from women, as the crisis was so pervasive. A new chapter began in the fight for women’s rights. From a middle-class movement, it spread to include the larger section of toiling women. Hunger marches were organised in the districts and branches of MAS were opened in the villages. From the bulletin of the All Bengal Mahila Atmaraksha Samity, Number 1, July 1943, we get an idea of their work in different areas during the food crisis.

The proposed policy was secular, for which MAS came to be recognised as a joint platform for Hindus and Muslims. In April 1944, the All Bengal Mahila Atmaraksha Samity unitedly with other women’s and relief organisations formed a joint committee to save the shelterless women from prostitution and to rehabilitate them in society. These campaigns were indispensable in preparing the rural poor for the Tebhaga rising.

24-Parganas
Pratibha Ganguly, Nibedita Chowdhury, Nalini Prova Ghosh, Bina Dubey, Rina Dey, Uma Ghosh and Shova Ganguly did the work of organising the women in the 24-Parganas. Dukhman Bibi and Gulbahar Bibi did the same work in Diamond Harbour and Tollygunge respectively.

In 1942 in the district of 24-Parganas at Mahestala, women’s self-defence committees were formed. In 1943, the report presented by MAS showed a terrible state of affairs. In Mathurapur and Barasat, the relief camps were opened in godowns. By the end of 1943, famine became acute in the whole of Bengal. The workers of MAS visited Champahati in the southern suburb of Calcutta.

At Naihati on April 8, 1944, 700 women delegates met in a conference. A procession of women came out and leading it was the celebrated woman novelist Prabhabati Devi Saraswati. Women from many conservative families of Bhatpara, a stronghold of orthodoxy, defied tradition and attended the open session.

The second annual conference of MAS, 1944
The number of members in the 24-Parganas at the time of the conference was 1306. Peasant women of Khaturia village (Gobordanga) started a relief kitchen centre from where milk and gruel were distributed to 60 children and 200 women. The meeting at Budge Budge was held on 19 March 1944, presided over by Ranibala Karmakar. It was attended by 200 women.
Activities of MAS during 1945

From the reports of Mahila Atmaraksha Samity, we get the following account of its work in 24-Parganas during the ‘Cloth Famine’:

1. A school was opened for destitute children in Naihati where primary education was arranged. Destitute women were in charge of the school.
2. Milk was distributed to 2,000 sick people and children every day.
3. A centre for adult education was opened at Belgharia.
4. A sewing centre was opened at Bhatpara with 13 women, but it had to be closed down for want of cloth.\textsuperscript{130}

During this period, a \textit{bahini} (corps) of volunteers was formed with women at Bamunpukur village under Haroa police station. Nalini Prova Ghosh and her daughter Bina Ghosh (later Dubey) were the leaders of the ‘\textit{bahini}’.\textsuperscript{131} Bina Ghosh conducted the training camp of peasant women at Bamunpukur. They were taught how to fight against the attack of the police and \textit{jotedars}. To train the uneducated women the ‘left-right’ parade, grass (\textit{ghas}) was tied to their left leg and straw (\textit{bichali}) to their right leg.\textsuperscript{132}

Barun Patra and other leaders inducted Sevarani Das, the widow of Govinda Chandra Das of Matherdighi into the ranks of activists. Her two-storeyed mud house, enclosed with a fencing, was used as the place of for secret meetings and resting of the leaders of Tebhaga Movement. She played a special role in organising the peasant movement through love and co-operation.\textsuperscript{133}

Kansari Haldar, Prabhas Roy, Jatin Maity, Gunadhar Maity, Md Abdullah Rasul and Manik Hazra held meetings with the women activists in the villages of Haripur, Chandanpiri, Loyalgunge and Budhakhali to discuss with them the aims and objectives of the struggle. The grass-roots leadership of the local activists played a significant role in organising the womenfolk.\textsuperscript{134}

Hindu and Muslim women organised informal meetings and asked their leaders to discuss before them the basic objectives of the struggle.\textsuperscript{135} The rural poor women of both communities gave shelter to the activists in their huts, cooked and carried food for them.\textsuperscript{136}

A destitute home was opened at Jaynagar through the efforts of the Joint Food Committee set up with the help of all women’s organisations, the Janasiksha Samiti, Friends Ambulance and other bodies. Ten women got shelter at the home. At Barasat another centre was opened with 70 destitute women. The Friends Ambulance unit opened two centre, one at Falta where 14 women worked, and another at Basirhat where 30 women worked.\textsuperscript{137}

The participation of women in the political meetings and demonstrations was remarkably significant in the 24-Parganas. Women from different communities attended the meetings organised by the Kisan Sabha. Their participation undoubtedly increased their self-confidence and made them conscious of their position.\textsuperscript{138}

Section 144 against 22 person in Sundarbans

Cases under Section 144 and Section 7 CrPC were filed against 22 persons of the Kakdwip police station area. As the local zamindar stopped threshing up to the month of June 1946, the sharecroppers were not getting their share. Being angry at this, the
sharecroppers did the threshing themselves by force and took their own share to their house.

When the subdivisional judge came for investigation, the sharecroppers demonstrated and complained against the injustice of the zamindar. The judge admitted the justification of their demand and warned the zamindar.

Ninety per cent of the cultivators in the Diamond Harbour and Sundarban areas were sharecroppers. At the news of victory of the cultivators of Kakdwip, there was an intense excitement among the cultivators of Sundarban.\(^{139}\)

In 1946, Bipin Das, a sharecropper, paid the major part of the paddy which he took as loan from zamindar Batakrishna Shau. The due was only 10 seers of paddy. But the zamindar would not consider. Bipin prayed for consideration falling on his legs. Batakrishna said, “The judge could be stirred, but my legs would not be stirred.” The peasants who were at the cutchery were angry on hearing these words and protest spread in different parts of the district.\(^{140}\)

In this way, the peasants organisation of the 24-Parganas became strong. The Tebhaga Movement started with the call of the BPKS in September 1946 and adoption of the resolution of Tebhaga Movement on 18 November 1946 at Duck Bungalow Maidan in Kakdwip.\(^{141}\) It spread like the fire of husk (tush), slowly but steadily.

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