From Tebhaga to Naxalbari: Peasant Insurrections and Radical Movements in Bengal

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Introduction

This book examines how rural grievances became revolutionary claims in Bengal, and how those claims in turn reshaped the institutions that sought to contain them. By following the arc from the Tebhaga movement of the 1940s to the Naxalbari uprising and its reverberations, the chapters connect peasant insurgency to broader political, economic, and cultural transformations. Rather than treating village and city as separate worlds, the narrative foregrounds the exchanges that moved organizers, ideas, weapons, and rumors across these spaces. The result is an account of agrarian agitation that is attentive to everyday struggles over tenancy and wages while also charting the dramatic ruptures of rebellion and repression.

Our approach is interdisciplinary. Drawing on social history, political sociology, cultural studies, and legal anthropology, the volume situates peasant resistance within long histories of land control, revenue extraction, and market integration. Archival sources—government reports, intelligence files, party pamphlets, court records, and local newspapers—anchor the analysis in the textual debris of both rule and revolt. These documents are placed in conversation with oral histories gathered from sharecroppers, plantation workers, student activists, and former officials. The testimonies complicate official narratives, illuminating how memory, rumor, and moral economy shaped choices at moments when the costs of action were severe and the future uncertain.

The chapters argue that cycles of mobilization and repression were not merely reactive but constitutive of state formation in Bengal. Policing, legal innovation, and development schemes emerged alongside, and often because of, insurgent challenges. The book traces how laws designed to manage sharecropping and land ceilings, the expansion of rural panchayats, and later tenancy reforms such as recording and securing cultivators’ rights both responded to and redirected contentious politics. Attention to these feedback loops clarifies why certain reforms pacified discontent in some locales while sharpening conflict in others.

Equally central is the relationship between ideology and social structure. The Tebhaga demand for a greater share of produce crystallized economic grievances into a program, while the Naxalbari moment translated radical critique into a repertoire of action that included occupation, boycott, and sabotage. Yet ideology never floated free of context. Class was crosscut by caste, indigeneity, and gender; tea plantations and deltaic rice fields produced distinct labor regimes and solidarities; and student movements in Calcutta forged symbolic languages that did not always travel smoothly to the countryside. By charting these tensions, the book resists romantic narratives of unified peasantries or singular revolutions.

Culture and communication form another thread. Songs, posters, pamphlets, and little magazines articulated visions of justice and sacrifice, helped recruit across literacy

divides, and kept alive memories of martyrs. They also became targets of censorship and surveillance, revealing how the state monitored not only bodies and weapons but also words and images. The cultural archive shows how affect—hope, anger, fear, dignity—was organized and mobilized, and how it sustained activists through defeats as well as victories.

Comparative perspective sharpens the analysis. Bengal’s trajectories are read alongside agrarian struggles elsewhere in India and across the Global South, where debates over strategy—mass line versus vanguard action, electoral engagement versus armed struggle—recur under different historical pressures. These juxtapositions clarify what was specific to Bengal’s land tenure, party landscape, and refugee politics, and what patterns travel across contexts marked by uneven development and coercive governance.

Finally, the volume is organized to move from structures to events to legacies. Early chapters reconstruct the political economy of the countryside and the emergence of Tebhaga; middle chapters examine the radicalization around Naxalbari and the state’s counterinsurgency; later chapters trace reforms, memory work, and the shifting terrain of land and development. Together, they show that peasant-led movements were not episodic disturbances at the margins but central forces in the making of modern Bengal—forces that continue to echo in contemporary conflicts over land, labor, and democratic accountability.

CHAPTER ONE: Land, Labor, and the Making of Bengal’s Countryside

Bengal, a land woven with a complex tapestry of rivers, fertile plains, and dense forests, has long been a crucible of agricultural life. Its deltaic character, shaped by the Ganga and Brahmaputra, bestowed upon it a unique agrarian rhythm, one dictated by the monsoons and the annual flooding that both nourished and threatened its fields. This was no static landscape; it was a dynamic arena where human ingenuity met the unpredictable forces of nature, giving rise to intricate systems of land tenure and labor relations that would, over centuries, define the very fabric of its society.

At the heart of Bengal's rural economy lay rice cultivation, the staple that sustained its teeming millions. The methods were often labor-intensive, relying on traditional tools and the collective effort of entire villages. Fields were meticulously prepared, often through generations of back-breaking work, transforming marshlands and forests into productive paddy. This intimate connection to the land fostered a deep sense of place and community, but it also embedded within it the seeds of potential conflict,

particularly as external forces began to exert their influence.

Before the advent of extensive colonial rule, the agrarian landscape of Bengal was characterized by a diverse array of landholding patterns. While local rulers and powerful zamindars (landlords) held significant sway, their authority was often tempered by customary rights and the practical realities of managing a vast and often unruly countryside. Village communities, with their own internal structures and norms, played a crucial role in mediating disputes and organizing labor. This decentralized system, while not without its hierarchies and inequalities, offered a degree of flexibility and local autonomy that would later be eroded.

The very fertility of Bengal’s soil, while a blessing, also made it a coveted prize. Empires rose and fell, each leaving its mark on the land and its people. From ancient kingdoms to the Mughal Empire, various administrations sought to extract surplus from the agricultural heartland, primarily through taxation on land produce. These revenue demands, while sometimes heavy, were often negotiated and adapted to local conditions, preventing widespread destitution and maintaining a fragile balance within the agrarian structure. The relationship between the state and the cultivator was, at times, extractive, but it was also understood to be a reciprocal one, where the state provided a degree of protection and infrastructure in exchange for its share.

The physical geography of Bengal further shaped its agrarian society. The extensive network of rivers facilitated not only irrigation but also transportation, allowing for the movement of goods and people. This connectivity fostered vibrant local markets, where agricultural produce was exchanged, and where the rhythm of the harvest dictated economic activity. These markets were not merely economic hubs; they were also social spaces, where news was shared, alliances forged, and grievances aired. The bustling haats (weekly markets) and permanent bazaars were vital arteries of rural life, reflecting the interconnectedness of the region.

Alongside rice cultivation, other forms of agricultural production also flourished, albeit on a smaller scale. Jute, a fiber crop, gained increasing importance, particularly with the rise of global trade. Its cultivation often required different labor arrangements and introduced new economic dependencies, linking Bengal's rural economy to distant markets and international prices. Sugarcane, oilseeds, and various vegetables also contributed to the diverse agricultural output, providing livelihoods for different segments of the rural population. This agricultural diversity, while enriching the local economy, also meant that different communities experienced the pressures of the land in distinct ways.

The social structure of rural Bengal was equally intricate, reflecting a complex interplay of caste, religion, and economic status. While Hinduism and Islam were the dominant religions, within each existed numerous sects and social divisions. Caste hierarchies, though often less rigid than in some other parts of India, still played a

significant role in determining access to land, occupations, and social standing. Different caste groups were traditionally associated with specific agricultural tasks, creating a stratified labor force where access to resources was far from equitable.

The relationship between different social groups was often characterized by a delicate balance of cooperation and competition. Farmers, artisans, laborers, and landlords were all part of an interdependent system, each contributing to the functioning of the rural economy. However, beneath the surface of apparent harmony, tensions often simmered. Disputes over land boundaries, water rights, and wages were common, and these minor frictions could, under certain circumstances, escalate into more significant conflicts. The very systems designed to maintain order also contained the potential for its disruption.

The village itself was a microcosm of this complex social and economic order. It was not merely a collection of houses but a living entity with its own customs, traditions, and informal power structures. The village elders, often drawn from the dominant landowning families, played a crucial role in resolving disputes and maintaining social cohesion. Religious institutions, such as temples and mosques, also served as important social centers, fostering a sense of community and providing a space for collective identity.

The environment, too, was an active participant in shaping Bengal's agrarian destiny. The annual monsoons, while vital for irrigation, also brought the constant threat of floods, which could devastate crops and displace entire populations. Conversely, periods of drought could lead to widespread famine, pushing already vulnerable communities to the brink. This inherent uncertainty meant that risk mitigation and adaptation were central to rural life, fostering a resilient but often precarious existence. The resilience, however, often came at a cost, particularly for those with the least resources.

The early forms of land tenure were largely informal, based on customary practices and oral agreements. While some written records existed, particularly for larger landholdings, the day-to-day management of land was often governed by unwritten rules and local understandings. This fluidity, while sometimes beneficial in allowing for adaptation to changing circumstances, also presented opportunities for exploitation, particularly as more formal systems of ownership began to emerge. The transition from custom to codified law would prove to be a significant turning point, altering the power dynamics of the countryside.

The labor system was predominantly agrarian, with a large proportion of the population engaged directly in cultivation. This included landowning farmers, tenant cultivators, and landless laborers. The latter group, often from the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, faced the greatest precarity, dependent on daily wages or seasonal employment. Their lives were marked by a constant struggle for survival, with little to

no security of tenure or income. This inherent vulnerability would later become a significant catalyst for social unrest.

The concept of property, particularly land ownership, was itself evolving. While land was traditionally seen as a source of livelihood and social status, the notion of absolute private ownership, with its transferable rights, gained prominence over time. This shift was gradual, influenced by changing political economies and administrative practices. The implications of this evolution were profound, as it increasingly allowed for the accumulation of land in fewer hands and the commodification of agricultural resources.

The tools and techniques of cultivation, passed down through generations, were testament to the ingenuity of Bengal's farmers. Ploughs drawn by bullocks, simple hoes, and traditional irrigation methods were finely tuned to the local conditions. While seemingly rudimentary, these methods were often highly efficient for the prevailing scale of agriculture and available resources. Innovation, however, was often incremental, and large-scale technological shifts were rare, leaving the agrarian economy susceptible to environmental shocks and limited in its capacity for rapid growth.

The rhythms of agricultural work profoundly influenced social life. The planting season, the harvest, and the periods of fallow each brought their own set of rituals, festivals, and social gatherings. These communal activities not only celebrated the bounty of the land but also reinforced social bonds and collective identity. The shared experience of working the land created a sense of solidarity, even amidst the inequalities that characterized rural society. These shared experiences, however, could also become the breeding ground for collective action when grievances mounted.

The early forms of trade and commerce were localized, with surplus agricultural produce exchanged within regional networks. These networks facilitated the distribution of goods and helped to sustain rural economies. The emergence of more extensive trade routes and the increasing influence of mercantile interests would gradually transform these localized systems, integrating Bengal's countryside into larger economic spheres and exposing it to new pressures and opportunities.

The power structures within the village were often intricately linked to land ownership. Those who controlled significant tracts of land often held considerable social and political influence, acting as patrons, arbiters, and sometimes, exploiters. This localized power, while sometimes benevolent, could also be wielded to maintain existing inequalities and suppress dissent. The interplay between formal state authority and informal village power would be a recurring theme in Bengal's agrarian history.

Education in the rural areas was often limited, primarily confined to traditional religious schools or rudimentary instruction focused on practical skills. Literacy rates were generally low, particularly among the peasant and laboring classes. This lack of formal education often limited opportunities for upward mobility and made communities more susceptible to manipulation by those with greater access to information and power. However, oral traditions and informal networks often served as important channels for knowledge and information dissemination.

The diets of the rural population were predominantly vegetarian, based on rice, lentils, and seasonal vegetables. Meat and fish, while consumed, were often considered luxuries or reserved for special occasions. This dietary reliance on staple crops meant that fluctuations in agricultural yields directly impacted the nutritional well-being of the population, making them particularly vulnerable during times of scarcity. The struggle for food security was a constant undercurrent in daily life.

Artisan communities, such as weavers, potters, and blacksmiths, played an integral role in the rural economy, providing essential goods and services. Their skills were often passed down through generations, and their livelihoods were closely intertwined with the prosperity of the agricultural sector. However, as external markets and mass-produced goods began to penetrate the countryside, these traditional artisan communities faced increasing competition and economic pressure.

The legal framework governing land and labor was often a complex mosaic of customary law, religious dictates, and evolving state regulations. This patchwork of legal systems could lead to ambiguities and contradictions, creating opportunities for both legitimate claims and opportunistic manipulations. The interpretation and enforcement of these laws often favored those with greater social standing and access to legal resources, further entrenching existing power imbalances.

The Bengal countryside was not isolated from broader political currents. Empires and kingdoms, from time to time, attempted to implement their own land policies, often with varying degrees of success. These interventions, while sometimes aimed at improving revenue collection or consolidating power, could also inadvertently disrupt existing social structures and create new sources of tension. The imposition of new systems often met with resistance, sometimes overt, sometimes subtle.

Religious practices and beliefs deeply permeated rural life, influencing everything from agricultural rituals to social customs. Festivals, pilgrimages, and daily devotions provided a spiritual framework for existence, offering solace in times of hardship and reinforcing community bonds. These shared cultural and religious practices could also serve as powerful unifying forces, capable of mobilizing people for collective action.

The system of debt was an omnipresent feature of rural life. Farmers and laborers

often borrowed money from moneylenders, landlords, or richer farmers to cover expenses for seeds, tools, or consumption during lean periods. These loans often came with exorbitant interest rates, trapping many in a cycle of perpetual indebtedness. This economic dependency often created a subordinate relationship between debtors and creditors, further exacerbating existing inequalities.

The environment, therefore, was not merely a backdrop but an active agent in shaping Bengal's agrarian society. The fertile plains, the mighty rivers, the unpredictable monsoons – all played a role in determining patterns of settlement, methods of cultivation, and the very rhythms of life. Human societies adapted to these conditions, developing sophisticated local knowledge and practices, but they also remained vulnerable to nature's whims.

The social order, while seemingly stable, was always in flux. The constant negotiation between landlords and tenants, cultivators and laborers, was an ongoing process, shaped by economic pressures, social norms, and the looming threat of scarcity. These everyday interactions, seemingly mundane, formed the bedrock upon which larger movements of resistance and rebellion would eventually be built. It was a world where tradition met nascent modernity, where local customs clashed with increasingly centralized authority, setting the stage for the dramatic transformations that lay ahead.
