

Revolutionary Activism and Left Politics in Birbhum District: The Formative Phase (1930s and 1940s)

Swarupananda Saha*

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***Abstract:** After independence in 1947 in India specifically in West Bengal the left politics was Became a major powerful political force and dominated for next 50 years in playing the role as the oppositional force and in performing Ruling Since 1977 for next 35 years. It is also evident that the left parties yielded their support from rural Bengal. Therefore, study for their development of power in rural base of west Bengal is worthy to be done. This paper seeks to the development of left politics in rural west Bengal focusing particularly on the Birbhum district in their formative phase since 1930s till 1947.*

***Key Words:** Left Politics, Birbhum, West Bengal, Communist Party of India, Revolutionaries, Amar Kuthir.*

*Ph.D. Scholar, Dept. of History, Visva-Bharati, West Bengal.
e-mail: swarupandasaha@gmail.com

Introduction

By 1977, leftist politics had firmly entrenched itself in the political landscape of India, particularly in West Bengal, and had successfully established elected Governments in two significant states, namely Kerala and West Bengal by securing a substantial majority. However, the trajectory of left politics within the Indian Democratic system was far from linear, devoid of a delineated roadmap. The assimilation of leftist ideologies into the Indian Democratic framework presented formidable challenges and intricacies. Nonetheless, the proponents of left politics steadfastly adhered to their revolutionary idealism, meticulously adapting their electoral practices to align with the imperatives of their ideological vision.¹ The genesis of their journey can be traced back to the 1920s when a younger educated generation imbued with the spirit of the Russian Revolution, earnestly embraced Marxist and socialist tenets, translating them into tangible action. In this context it is necessary to explain the connotation of 'Left Politics'. Here 'left Politics' refers to the organisations and Movements led by Communist and Marxist political parties. Undoubtedly the communist party of India is the most important and crucial among the leftist political parties in Bengal either in carrying out Movements or building up organizations.

Review literature

The historical Research on Indian left politics can be understood by dividing it into two broader categories— *firstly*, writings that mainly focused on national and international developments. *Secondly*, writings that are mainly concerned with regional development. Overstreet and Windmiller had tried to understand Indian communism from national perspectives and their work is one of the pioneering works in that category.² They tried to find out the development of Indian communism through the lens of Anti-imperialist and Anti-capitalist struggle and alternativeness. They said they worked with Congress when the Anti-imperialist position got impetus. But the Anti-capitalist position was in motion they maintained a certain distance from the bourgeois congress. Their work also visited the aspect of the goal of the communist party of India which is always connected with the goal of the international communist movement.

Bhavani Sengupta did critical work on Indian communism. His close consideration of the Indian communist movement made him more critical in his work.³ The Indian communist movement, according to him, was always in dilemma in considering how to make assimilation of communist doctrine into the national milieu. While they tried hard to Indianize the doctrine, they faced many complications from the outer and inner worlds. Sengupta put it that the internal difference among the communists and

the consequent division of the party into several splinter groups too were the outcome of this quest for legitimacy within the Indian political process while retaining its link with the international Communist Movement. But after CPIM achieved legitimacy through the electoral process and became a formidable actor in the electoral game, the communist party, according to Sengupta, did not present itself much differently from the Congress government. In searching the roots of the internal disagreement and the fragmentation, T.R. Sharma located the derivatives impact of the international happening in the Communist Movement. The rivalry between the Chinese camp and the soviet Camp directly influenced Indian Communism.⁴

Studies on the regional variations of the development of the Indian left are not a recent phenomenon. Though it is quite right to state that the focus of these studies is mainly made on Bengal and Kerala. It can be because the leftist politics firmly firmed their foothold in these two states and made election victory. To trace the origin of the leftist parties in Bengal, David Laushey argued that all leftist parties in Bengal drew their substantial chunk of membership from terrorist groups who were motivated by Marxist literature.⁵ The fractional and group politics of the terrorist groups were reflected in the later fractional leftist politics. The older group identities and loyalties still survived in the channel of the new orientation. Marcus Franda argued that in the 20th century, Bengal experienced a general gradual decline and humiliation.⁶ To overcome the situation there was a search for new regional identity and regional political power. Communism as doctrine quenches the thrust of the Bengalis dealing with the crisis. Politically it was a need of the Bengali revolutionaries. In addition, Franda also pointed out that although communism found solid ground in Bengal still the goal of Bengali communism was not well defined. The communist movement in Bengal was continuously weakened by intense factionalism and Bengali communists were heavily dependent on the Soviet Union and China for extending their gains.

T. J. Nossiter studied Keralan Communism with a substantial search for identity. Particularly after independence was induced by a sense of discontent against an oppression and unsympathetic central government. he analyses the base of the Keralan through a process of social mobilization. In the early 20th century, according to him, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalan Yagom(SNDP) caste association cultivated a new social identity especially among the low-caste Ezhavas through the promotion of Education and the growth of consciousness about the various forms of economic exploitation like deprivation of land ownership, servitude carried in name of rules. Hence Congress being a high-class party failed to cope with the new social endeavour. On the contrary, Communism in Kerala successfully grasped this popular mobilization

around the dominant economic and social issues that made Communism an integral part of the mainstream political life of Kerala. Therefore, in this way, Communism in Kerala created a distinct identity. Consequently, as Nossiter pointed out, when Kerala communists adopted electoral politics, they achieve success. However, this electoralism of the communist force was not been alienated from other forms of struggle. So, to Kerala, parliamentary institutions as 'Instruments of struggle' that's the distinctiveness of Keralian Communism. On the other hand, compared to Kerala, Communism in West Bengal has seen a small group of communists and Naxalites. However, all communists in West Bengal accepted the inevitability and propriety of the electoral process.⁷

Anjali Ghosh thinks that the leftist vision of left-front parties was mainly attracted to the younger section with new tactical politics. Furthermore, they were the vanguard of the peaceful transition to socialism in West Bengal. She also added that the opposition parties in the state coalesced/ convened against Congress Government not for ideological singularity but out of political compulsion as no single party had the majority to form Government. She further opined that this coal was an unavoidable political process in future. However, she added, this coalition would not play a positive role due to a lack of ideological consensus and only create a lot of instability and confusion.⁸

Ross Mallick viewed that stability was achieved through a major ideological compromise that was apparent in the failure of the left parties to find out any balancing strategy between its emancipatory ideas and constitutional practices. The failure of Indian Communism, as Mallick marks, was already even before the left front came to power. The Radical and precipitous actions of the Ultras could not be sustained for long in the fall of organised repression of State and left parties depended on the formation of multiparty alliance and extension of the vote bank even among the so-called class enemies. This constrained left parties to take any rigorous initiatives for the benefit of the poor and depressed class. He also argued that the Left Front failed, not primarily because of its limitations on its power and resources, but because it did not make appropriate use of powers and resources that it had at its disposal. Rather than promoting the interest of the rural and urban lower classes, it gave primacy to the traditional rural and urban middle-class base of the communist movement, which ultimately proved an obstacle to the further advancement both of lower-class interests.⁹ In analysing the left-front Government Mallick thinks that the biggest beneficiaries of the left-front Rule were the rural middle class and sections of the urban lower and middle class who were in govt. services and public sector enterprises. In practice in

West Bengal, the rich and the middle class have become the dominant class with only transitory and secondary benefits filtering down to the agricultural labourers and the poor peasantry. He also refers that after the division of the party in 1964, ideological compulsions disappeared from the party and self-interest and ego clash retained the development of the leftist movement. He is in opinion that in pursuit of short-term electoral gains, CPI(M) has sacrificed both its revolutionary and its reformist options and can do nothing but cling to office through the distribution of largesse.¹⁰

On the subject of ideology concern, Amitabh Chandra argued that excessive electoralism has weakened the ideological militancy of communist parties in West Bengal. He also added that the communists utilised parliamentary means as a tactical weapon to strengthen their struggle for complete social change. However, the success in electoral practices made them obsessed with electoral gains, consequently leading them to abandon the extra parliamentary means of struggle. Sudhir Roy found the strength of leftist mobilization, which made them oppose power and contributed to forming an alternative Government.¹¹

After analysing the foregoing discussion, it appears that there hasn't been a comprehensive research-based micro-study on the evolution and development of left politics in Bengal. Most of the literature available is focused on the development of left politics in and around Kolkata. This paper aims to delve into the formative phase of left politics in rural Bengal, specifically in Birbhum District focusing on the Revolutionary Activism and Amar Kuthir, the main centre of left politics in the district during 1930s and 1940s.

Birbhum District

The District of Birbhum is located in the Northern part of the Burdwan Administrative Division and is located in the South-West part of West Bengal. The District of Birbhum situated between 23°32' 33" and 24°35'00" North Latitude and between 88°01' 40" and 87°05'25" East Longitude. The district looks like an isosceles triangle in shape.¹² The North and West of the District are bounded by Jharkhand State which was earlier known as the Santal Pargana. On the East, Birbhum is bounded by the District of Murshidabad and Burdwan and on the South by Burdwan District. The river Ajay is situated in the south and it separates the district from Burdwan.

Leftist politics was introduced and developed in the rural district of Birbhum through the efforts of revolutionaries who were influenced by Marxist and socialist ideas. They converted themselves to Marxism and played a pivotal role in promoting the ideology. They also actively participated in struggles for the rights of peasants and

workers. Therefore, Left politics infiltrated mainly in the Birbhum district through these movements of peasants and workers. Amar Kuthir of Bolpur in the district became the main centre of these activities. This paper focuses solely on the contributions of revolutionaries and the works of Amar Kuthir. It played a dominant role in the development of left politics in the district.

This trend of Revolutionary Activism was visible in the district of Birbhum from 1927 onwards. But till 1930, it was limited and in the primary stage. Jagadish Ghosh of Dubrajpur and Binay Choudhury were prominent figures in organizing the Revolutionary Activism in the district. In 1923 Jagadish Ghosh came into contact with Detenu Narendranath Banerjee at Labpur who initially influenced him with revolutionary ideas. Soon after, Jagadish Ghosh came into contact with a Famous Revolutionary figure in Bengal, Bipin Behari Ganguly.¹³ Between 1923 and 1928 he visited various areas of the district as an advertiser for a Kolkata-based Khadi Society and built-up connections with congress volunteers. In 1928, when became the assistant secretary of Birbhum Congress, he tried to utilise the congress organization to channel the Revolutionary Spirit in the District. Many young members of Anushilan and Jugantar Samity joined this Revolt group to accelerate the Revolutionary movement. he also made proper arrangements among the young congress volunteers to read revolutionary literature. Prangopal Mukherjee, Rajat Bhusan Dutta, Dwarik Roy, Binay Choudhury, and Satyanarayan Chandra became close to him. Jagadish Gosh during this time came into contact with famous revolutionary Ambika Chakraborty just before September 1929 who was during that time at Suri jail as Detenu.¹⁴

As a result of this development, Birbhum Congress split into two groups— one group at Suri influenced by Jitendra Mohan Sengupta, led by Sarat Mukherjee, Sonata Kaviraj, Gopikabisa sen and another group who established their office immediately at Ahmedpur, later shifted to Kunchuighata village influenced by S.C. Bose and Led by Suren Sarkar, Jagadish Ghosh. The last group was followed by the majority of the party and this group continued the revolutionary activities in the district. During the period many women were active in revolutionary Activism such as Sarojini Debi of Halisa, Dubrajpur, Satybala Debi of Mallarpur who later joined CPI, Sindhubala Debi of Ahmedpur, Manimala of Malihati, Sabitri Gupta of Bhalas.¹⁵

This Anushilan group of the district on 17th June 1931 tried to free prominent Revolutionary Ambika Chakraborty from Suri jail, though they failed to free him.¹⁶ In April 1933 a secret conference of this group took place at Halsa, Dubrajpur where a new Revolutionary Samity was formed, New Socialist Republican Association (NSRA).¹⁷ The aims of NSRA were very clarified, to free India from British rule and to establish a

Republic Socialist Govt. through armed Revolution. There was a clear influence of the North Indian Revolutionary organization Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in the formation of the NSRA organization. The primary idea of this organisation was to blend socialist and democratic ideas with Revolutionary nationalism.¹⁸ This group had connections with Santosh Mitra's communist and socialist groups. A central committee under the presidentship of Umashankar Konar an advisory committee under the presidentship of Rajatbhusan Dutta and the secretaryship of Prabhat Kushum Ghosh were formed. Many divisional canthers in Birbhum and neighbouring areas were built up to exercise the Revolutionary activities as at Dubrajpur, Suri, mollarpur, bhalash and with many secrete centres at Bolpur, rampurhat, jajigram, and so on. Before taking any bigger Revolutionary move, Jagadish Ghosh was arrested under Bengal Criminal Amendment Act in 1932 and in 1934 when Nityagopal Bhowmick leaked every news about NSRA, 42 persons were arrested on charges of seditious activities. The case was registered on 14th July 1934 and the court judgement was released on 30th April 1935. This case was known as the famous Birbhum Conspiracy Case.¹⁹

In cellular jail like other Revolutionaries, the revolutionaries of Birbhum were attracted to Marxism and embraced the Marxist ideas of Social Revolution. From Nov 1937 to July 1938, they returned to the district. A new development in the political arena of the district was initiated. They started to devote themselves fully to peasants and workers' Movements influenced by Marxist Ideas.²⁰ Within a short period, they build up Marxist organizations in the district and Amar Kuthir became the centre of their activities.

Amar Kuthir

Since 1936 Amar Kuthir was the hub of left politics in Birbhum for next few years. From its inception, Amar Kuthir carried a socialist orientation. According to the report of the intelligence bureau, the primary purpose of the Amar Kuthir Organisation was twofold- firstly, to overthrow British Rule and establish a federal republic Government. it seems similar to the revolutionary organisation HSRA and NSRA. Secondly. To establish an exploitless Social System.²¹ Further according to the official report of Amar Kuthir, the organisation aimed to develop a 'commune' in a portion of underdeveloped and backward rural Bengal through the new land of agriculture, cloth printing, handloom, and leather crafting that could be the main centre of freedom, socialist and peasant movement of Birbhum.²² In 1928 Amar Kuthir was banned as Sushen Banerjee persuaded Socialist Ideology and activities in Amar Kuthir. Within a few years in 1932 according to B.C.L.A. Act (1930), Sushen Banerjee was arrested suspecting his

connection with the revolutionary groups and giving shelter to many revolutionaries at Amar Kuthir. After his arrest within a short time without having maintenance Amar Kuthir turned to an abandoned place and the office of Amar Kuthir was shifted to Kolkata.²³

After the release of Sushen Mukherjee in 1938, a new age started for Amar Kuthir. After release, he returned to Amar Kuthir and once again, he reorganised Amar Kuthir in a new enthusiastic way. He established 'Tennary and Dying Farm'. Now it has become more political than earlier and has made a crucial contribution to the political development of the district. In 1938 many leaflets, magazines and books were published by Amar Kuthir in which the aim of the organization was thoroughly explained and openly appealed to the youths and politically minded people to join Amar Kuthir. During 1932-37 Sushen Mukherjee was retained in various jails such as in Dinajpur (1934-35), and Kalimpong (1936-37) where he came into touch with many revolutionaries like— Pannalal Dasgupta, Manoranjan Dutta, Kalipada Basistha, Suren Banerjee and others. It is evident that from 1934 onwards these revolutionaries were attracted to leftist thought and read Marxist literature. While interacting with Sushen Mukherjee, they came to know about the idea Amar Kuthir project and they became pond this project. Therefore, when Sushen Mukherjee appealed to them to join Amar Kuthir, they and many other revolutionaries accepted the call of Sushen Mukherjee.²⁴

As a result, from 1938-40 many ex-revolutionaries who now believed in the Marxist way of struggling to free India from British rule and to establish an exploited less society joined the Amar Kuthir Movement. On the other hand, Sushen Mukherjee though was a supporter of HSRA but he always kept Amar Kuthir out of this particular political philosophy. As He strongly believed in the Autonomous existence of Amar Kuthir, he introduced several rules to get membership of it. According to the rules, any member of Amar Kuthir could not take membership in any group or any party. Members would work for the country. Village reconstruction and making people self-sufficient were the main focus of the organization. But with the initiation of the 2nd phase of its journey, Amar Kuthir within a short span became the main political centre of the district. The ex-revolutionaries who joined Amar Kuthir, did not did not want to leave their past revolutionary element in their struggle but they now studied Marxism and started to believe in socialist thought. Therefore, a new political philosophy, blending two elements revolutionary spirit and socialism emerged at this juncture which can be coined as Revolutionary Socialism.²⁵

An interesting aspect of Amar Kuthir is that it's the members though having different political backgrounds, worked here together which was very symbolic in the

political history of Bengal. The intelligence bureau of the district was in confusion about the togetherness of its members and they described this togetherness as Amar Kuthir Party. Though having different opinions regarding peasants' questions, the Communist League and C.P.I members of Amar Kuthir worked together in organising peasant Movements in the district. Inspired by this enthusiasm many other leftist leaders outside of Amar Kuthir involved themselves in these peasant movements. But this appreciable togetherness did not last for a long time. During the second world war, when Amar Kuthir members and C.P.I leaders Kalipada Basistha, Suren Banerjee others were propagating against fascism, then that time the C.L members of Amar Kuthir Pannalal Dasgupta, Manoranjan Datta and others had a political conflict with them. So very soon the leaders of CPI left Amar Kuthir and took the leadership of CPI in the district. On the other hand, C.L. leaders took control of the night schools which by that time undertook peasants' movements in nearby areas led by Kishan Sabha and C.L. leaders propagated their Anti-War movements through it.²⁶

Conclusion

The new members of Amar Kuthir initiated many night schools in Bolpur, Ilambazar, Dubrajpur, Sainthia, and Labpur to educate agricultural labourers. But soon after these schools became the centre of their political activities. They also looked after the people during the flood and in the 1943 famine they such as Pannalal Dasgupta established relief camps to meet the hunger of the working people. So, by helping and serving the common people during their needs, they penetrated their acceptance of the common people. They are always against the Zamindari exploitation and so they encourage the people to struggle against the Zamindars. Amar Kuthir made a great contribution to the peasants' movements in the district. Amar Kuthir members build up 'Gana Bahini' by organising peasants and workers of the district. It had also taken the initiative in organising the Quit India movement in 1942. On 29th August 1942 Amar Kuthir members led Santal and tribals to wage an attack at Bolpur railway station and other Govt. institutions.²⁷

Thus, the ex-revolutionaries played a significant role in shaping left politics in Birbhum district. Amar Kuthir quickly became one of the most important centres of left politics in the district. In addition to the contribution made by the revolutionaries, there was also a noticeable emergence of educated middle-class youths who were exposed to Marxist and communist ideas outside the district. These individuals brought these ideas with them and joined the peasants' and workers' movements.

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