

## **Saumyendranath Tagore And The Peasant Movements Of Birbhum**

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**Abstract:-***Saumyendranath Tagore was one of the pioneers of the Communist Movement of Bengal. He was a champion of the voice and causes of the lower sections of the society- the peasants, factory workers, students and other downtrodden sections. He protested against, and tried to ameliorate, the insupportable condition of their existence. After the formation of the CLI in 1934 Saumyendranath Tagore concentrated on mobilizing the peasants and workers. Very soon he was successful in building up centres in Birbhum and other districts of Bengal. In Birbhum district it was the zamindari system which was the root cause of the exploitation and tyranny on the peasantry. Khairasole, Dubrajpur, Murarai police stations were under the influence of CLI or RCPI. Bolpur and Labhpur police station areas were also influenced by the CLI. Pannalal Dasgupta was the key man in organising the peasants in Birbhum district. He was influenced by Saumyendranath. Organization of the CLI or RCPI flourished in Dubrajpur and Khairasole police station area under the leadership of Surendranath Sarkar and Bhudeb Das. A movement against the Zamindar of Loba-Bhamra area of Dubrajpur PS was organized by the Communist League in the first half of the 1940s. Communist League again organized a movement for the interest of rural people in the beginning of 1944 to hold the production of paddy in the villages. Tagore's party organized peasant movements in these areas which were directed against local landlords and moneylenders. The aim of the CLI was not only to protect the peasants from tyranny and oppression, but also to awaken revolutionary consciousness among the peasants for the socialist revolution.*

**Keywords:** *Saumyendranath Tagore, CLI/RCPI, Bengal Provincial Kishan Sabha, Zamindari System, Mahajans, Debt Settlement Board, Derabari System etc.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

For long Indian history had been dominated by political and economic stand points. In recent times attempts have been made to bring to light the history of the locality. A corpus of books and articles on it has come up in the last few decades which tend to highlight the basic characteristics and dimension of a small region. The study of local history focuses on local diversities. These micro studies throws light on social structure and relation of agrarian people, their unrest, and their way of protest have been found and information concerning regional protest has also taken place during this period. All these have enriched the study of peasant movement of Birbhum led by Saumyendranath Tagore. [i] Saumyendranath was one of the main architects of the communism and trade unionism in India. The communist party led by Saumyendranath played an important role in mobilizing the rural poor and the development of the peasant movement in Birbhum.

The present work investigates a number of studies that deals with and analyse the political and economic conditions of Birbhum and also engage with Saumyendranath Tagore and his rich political dimensions. W.W. Hunter was the first scholar to make sincere attempt to write the history of Birbhum. The name of his work was *The Annals of Rural Bengal* in 1868. However, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* which contains the report on Birbhum includes all aspects of the district such as its geography, people and their conditions, agriculture, trade, revenue and administration, was published serially from 1875-1877 by Statistics Department of Government of India. *District Gazetteer of Birbhum* by L.S.S. O'Malley published from Calcutta in 1910 is an important document on Birbhum. A book edited by Asoke Sen, Partha Chatterjee and Sougata Mukherjee named *Three studies on the Agrarian Structure in Bengal 1850-1947* was published in 1982 from Calcutta represents a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the agrarian economy of Bengal. They also analysed the relationship between peasants, landlords and the colonial state. Sirajul Islam in his book *Bengal Land Tenure* (Calcutta, 1988) dealt with the complex problem of the subinfeudation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. There are some other work which deals with the agrarian movements of Bengal-*Banglar Krishak Sangram* (Calcutta, 1975) and *Peasant Movements in India: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Calcutta, 1982) by Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in Bengal and Bihar* by Dipankar Bhattacharyya (Calcutta, 1992) and others. Only one book, an autobiography and some articles have been published on Saumyendranath Tagore's

contribution. The book is by Manjula Bose entitled *Saumyendranath Tagore: Karme O Monane* (Saumyendranath Tagore: His Work and Worldview) and was published in 2007. The books and articles written by Tagore are important documents for understanding the policies and perspectives of his party. These books and articles include (in Bengali): *Lenin* (Calcutta 1932), *Rosa Luxemburg* (Calcutta 1932), *Chasir Katha* (The Story of the Peasant; Calcutta 1939), *Fascism* (Calcutta 1934), *Trayee* (Calcutta 1935), and *Yatri* (Traveller; Calcutta 1357 BS). In English, his works include: *Hitlerism: The Aryan Rule in Germany* (Calcutta 1944), *Repression in Chittagong* (Calcutta 1936), *The Hour Has Struck* (Calcutta 1949), *Revolution and Quit India* (Calcutta 1946) and many others. After the death of Tagore, a book named *Against the Stream* has been published in two volumes. The first volume was published in 1975 from Calcutta and edited by Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya. This book is an anthology of political writings of Saumyendranath and covers a period of over a decade beginning from the late 1920s. The second volume was also edited by Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya and published in 1984 from Calcutta. It contains Saumyendranath's articles and pamphlets from September 1939 to August 1947. Amitava Chandra has written three successive articles on Saumyendranath Tagore and his organization in *ItihasAnusandhan*. Poet Jasimuddin in his book "Thakur BarirAnginaya" (In the Courtyard of the Tagore House; Calcutta 1368 BS) too gives some important information on Saumyendranath Tagore. A number of studies that deal with and analyse the theoretical framework of the communist movement in Bengal engage with Saumyendranath and his rich political dimensions. Amitava Chandra in his *Abibhakto Banglar Communist Andolon, SuchanaParbo* (The Communist Movement of Undivided Bengal, the Initial Phase; Calcutta 1992) presents a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the communist movement in Bengal from 1928 to 1941. Gautam Chattopadhyay in his *Samajtantrer Agni Porikkha O Bharoter Communist Andolon* (The Trial by Fire of Socialism and the Communist Movement of India; Calcutta 1992) traces the course of the Indian Communist movement from 1917 to 1946. Muzaffar Ahmad in his book *Bharater Communist Party GararPratham Jug* (The First Age of Organizing the Communist Movement of India; Kolkata 2011) and his other book *Samakaler Katha* (Annals of the Contemporary Times; Kolkata 2012) he discussed about the formation the Communist Party of India and of Workers and Peasants Party and its activities. David Petrie in his book *Communism in India 1924-1927* (Calcutta 1972) discussed the Communist activities during this period. *Communism in India* (University of California Press 1959) by Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller examine the growth of communism in India with special mention of Comintern. They also discuss trade unionism in India. In his study, *The Left Wing in India 1919-47* (Muzaffarpur 1965), L.P. Sinha discusses elaborately and vividly communism in India. There are some other works which deal with the communist movement and in them sometimes short but important tracts on Tagore crop up. *Communism in India, Unpublished Documents 1935-45* (Calcutta 1976) and *Communism in India, Unpublished Documents 1925- 34* (Calcutta 1980), both edited by Subodh Roy, *British Shasane Bajepto Bangla Boi* (Bengali Books Seized under the British Rule; Calcutta 1988) by Sisir Kar, *Bangalir Samyabad Charcha* (The Pursuit of Socialism by Bengalis; Calcutta 1998) edited by Sipra Sarkar and Anamitra Das, *Bengal 1928-1934* (New Delhi 1987) by Tanika Sarkar, *The Working Class Movement, A study of Jute mills of Bengal 1937-47* (Calcutta 1994) by Nirban Basu, *The Political Parties and Labour Politics 1937-47* (Calcutta 1992) by Nirban Basu, *Communist Movement in India 1917-39*, vol. I (Patna 1991) by Arindam Sen and Partha Ghosh, *Agrarian Relations in India 1793-1947* (New Delhi 1979) by Sunil Sen, *India and Communism, compiled in the Intelligence Bureau* (Calcutta 1933) by H. Williamson and many others.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The present article is an attempt to investigate the unrest among the agrarian people of Birbhum with special reference to the political party led by Saumyendranath Tagore in mobilizing and organising the present movement in this district. The study is based primarily on archival materials preserved in the State Archive of West Bengal, Calcutta and other primary sources. A lot of secondary works, memoirs and some newspapers have also been consulted.

### **Study Area of Research:**

Birbhum, Situated between 23° 32' 30" (right above the tropic of cancer) and 24° 35' 0" north latitude and 87° 5' 25" and 88° 1' 40" east longitudes, and about 4,545 square kilometres (1,755 sq mi) in area, this district is triangular. River Ajay forms the southern base and the apex of the triangle points north. The river forms the boundary between the districts of Birbhum and Bardhaman. The state of Jharkhand is at the northern and the western border of Birbhum and Murshidabad is at the east. Suri is the head quarter of Birbhum district. The study mainly deals with the peasant movements in Birbhum led by Saumyendranath Tagore and his party during 1930s and 1940s. It tries to investigate the unrest among the agrarian people of Birbhum with special reference to the economic condition and agrarian structure. The communist party led by Saumyendranath Tagore— called the Communist League of India (CLI) in the initial years but rechristened the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) in 1942— was such an organization and merits our careful and critical considerations.

***After the formation of CLI Saumyendranath started mobilizing the peasants of Birbhum:***

After the formation of the CLI [ii] in 1934 Saumyendranath Tagore concentrated on mobilizing the peasants and workers. Very soon he was successful in building up centres in Birbhum and other districts of Bengal. Though Tagore formed a united front in the peasant organization with the Bengal Provincial Kishan Sabha and organized peasant committees in Birbhum and other districts but later he formed his own organization. The economy of Birbhum was basically agriculture. So the Communist League had targeted the various segments of the agrarian community. The CLI stepped forward to organize the agriculturist masses. Like other districts of Bengal it was the zamindari system which was the root cause of the exploitation and tyranny on the peasantry. The party wanted to abolish the zamindari system. Saumyendranath believed that the zamindars must be destroyed to safeguard the peasants.

An Intelligence Branch report stated that Khairasole, Dubrajpur, Murarai police stations were under the influence of CLI. Bolpur and Labhpur police station areas were also influenced by the CLI. The Krishak Sabha of Sarpalehana village was formed by the workers of CLI and Haripada Sarkar of the village was attached to this organization. The activities of the Communist League can be categorized under three heads:

1. Educate the poor peasants politically
2. Organize prayer to the respective authorities for the redressing of grievances of the peasants
3. Organize movement against exploitation and extortion.[iii]

Pannalal Dasgupta [iv] was in Khairasole in Birbhum district from December 1934 to July 1936 and spread the message of socialism and communism. The Patrasayer conference at Bankura district in 1937 witnessed the presence of two representatives from Birbhum. One was Bhudeb Das who was greatly influenced by Pannalal Dasgupta and soon became a worker of the CLI. The Birbhum District Kisan Organizing Committee was formed in Birbhum on May 1937 by the political workers who were influenced by Pannalal.[v]

***Saumyendranath formed separate peasant organization in Birbhum and its first and second district conference:***

From the beginning of 1938 Tagore started to form a separate peasant organization independent of the CPI-controlled BPKS in different districts of Bengal. In the Birbhum district formation of Krishak Committee under the initiative of CLI was not readily accepted by the CPI workers of BPKS. In March 1938 two BDKS were formed in Birbhum. One was led by Amerandranath Sarkar of the CPI and the other BDKS by Surendranath Sarkar of the CLI.[vi] On 19 April 1938, CLI organized the district conference of their organization (BDKS) in Dubrajpur. Wide publicity was made in different places and collection of rice, dal and vegetables were made from the cultivators, supporters and well-wishers.[vii] Saumyendranath accompanied by Kabi Mahiuddin and Moulavi Bokainagori visited Birbhum district. On the morning of 19 April 1938 Saumyendranath and Kabi Mahiuddin arrived at Dubrajpur.[viii]

This conference was attended by 10,000 peasants under the presidency of Saumyendranath Tagore. Surendranath Sarkar.[ix] welcomed the delegates on behalf of the Reception Committee. Bipin Ganguly also attended the conference. Messages from Subhas Chandra Bose, Prof. N.G. Ranga, Swami Sahajananda and others were read out at the conference. Resolutions relating to peasant problems were adopted. Kabi Mahiuddin addressed the conference exhorting the audience to abandon communalism. Bipin Ganguly presented the welcome address on behalf of the Birbhum District Congress Committee.[x] Here, Saumyendranath Tagore discussed the true picture of the Bengal peasants and the economic condition of India. According to him “not only zamindars and mahajans are sucking your blood, the government also is doing the same.” He stressed on forming a separate peasant organization outside the Congress for the uplift of the peasant from their present unbearable condition. On the other hand, Surendranath had said that tax and inadequate irrigation system was the main obstacle in the development of agriculture. He stressed on peasant unity.[xi] The demands which were raised were as follows:

1. Constitute the Debt Settlement Board with the elected members from the peasants
2. The collection of land revenue by the zamindars should be stopped during drought
3. Derabari paddy-lending system should be abolished.[xii]

CLI controlled District Krishak Sabha held its second conference at Khairasole on 9 April 1939. The demands which were raised were the same as in the first conference. The most important demands were abolition of the zamindari system, exemption from arrear land revenue and reduction of current land revenue by 50 per cent. They also demanded fixing the minimum price for paddy and jute.[xiii] Tarapada Gupta of Berhampore came to Bolepur in December 1938 and discussed with the members of the Ganabani group of Birbhum like Pannalal and Radhagovindo Sarkar to chalk out combined programme in the district. And then the CLI (Pannalal) and CPI (Amarendranath) workers decided to work on a common programme amongst the peasants.[xiv]

***Movement against Derabari system in Khairasole:***

During 1938 in Khairasole a movement was organized against the dreadful paddy-lending system—Derabari. It was a paddy-lending system where borrowers took a loan of paddy during the sowing season and had to repay after the harvesting not more than four months with 150 per cent interest. Communist League workers came forward and organized a strike of the agricultural labourers against the excessive interest. This movement was led by NakariBagdi and SantiSoren.[xv] To organize his party Saumyendranath Tagore of Calcutta arrived at Rampurhat on 04 May1938 with Gopikabilas Sen of Suri in the afternoon and left for Calcutta on the morning of 5 May1938.[xvi] A Krishak Sabha was formed in Darpasila with Manmathanath De as president in July 1938. No-rent movement against the zamindars started and continued for some months. Government proceeded to take punitive action under Section 107 criminal proceedings against Communist League leaders like PannalalDasgupta, Manmathanath De, Surendranath Banerjee and others.[xvii] On April 1939 a big peasant conference of the CLI was held at Khairasole where Saumyendranath Tagore, GopikabilasSengupta and GopalDube delivered speeches. About 1,000 people attended this conference which was presided over by SudhirDasgupta of Calcutta. The oppression of the zamindars and some relevant demands were raised.[xviii] After the conference the cultivators of that area created pressure on the jotedars and money lenders for abolition of the Derabari system. At last the government was compelled to take note of their demands and the district magistrate of Birbhum asked the officers of the cooperative societies for advancing short term loans to the needy cultivators so that they might avoid borrowing paddy under the derabari system.[xix]

Communist League leaders during these years were trying to educate the peasants politically through meetings. The workers of the CLI who were in Amar Kutir organised numerous meetings in the villages and towns with the help of the local supporters. Intelligence Branch reports about several such meetings. 1 September 1938 was observed as All India Kishan Day by holding meetings in different places of the district under the Ganabani group. The detenu of Amar Kutir observed the Kisan Day at Ballavpur where Saumyendranath Tagore and Amarendranath Sarkar were also present.[xx] So the speeches which were delivered in those meetings were basically anti-zamindar, anti-union board, anti-British and pro-Krishan. The zamindars and moneylenders were identified as oppressors by the speakers. They also blamed that the government was solely responsible for the exploitation of the peasants. They said that the peasants had to unite to fight against these oppressors.

***A movement against the Zamindar of Loba-Bhamra area of Dubrajpur and the anti-war propaganda of the CLI in Birbhum:***

A movement against the Zamindar of Loba-Bhamra area of DubrajpurPS was organized by the Communist League in the first half of the 1940s. The zamindar of this of this area,Shurid Kumar Deb, was an absentee zamindarwho lived in Calcutta. The gomashta of the zamindarSashiBhusanChakraborty and the naibPramathanathGangully exploited the peasants tremendously. Communist League worker Sourindra Narayan Sen and the president of the Loba Union KrishakSamiti, Sasanka Kumar Sarkar, organized a mass petition on March-April 1940 and demanded redress from the zamindars. When the district magistrate intervened in this matter, the superintendent of the zamindars accepted all the demands made by the peasants.[xxi]

The anti-war propaganda of the CLI in Birbhum started with the outbreak of the Second World War. There was a change in the aim and activities of the Communist League. There was two methods in this movement: first,by distributing anti-war pamphlets and second, by directly approaching people to stand against the war. “Imperialist War in India”, written by Saumyendranath Tagore, was distributed among the people. In the end of October an anti-war propaganda committee was formed with PannalalDasgupta as president. Also, there was an effort to visit villages and make people aware of the imperialist character of the war.[xxii]

Saumyendranath was visiting Birbhum frequently during March-April 1940. According to an Intelligence Branch report, Saumyendranath Tagore who arrived at Bolepur on 25 March 1940 returned to Calcutta 26 March 1940. Again on 29 March 1940 Saumyendranath came to Sainthia by Kiul Passenger at 12:15 PM and held a closed-door meeting with the CLI workers in the house of one Kalikinkar Singh of Sainthia. The leaders of the district were invited to attend and strict secrecy was observed. The meeting lasted from 5.15 PM to 11.30 PM. The following, among others, attended:

1. GangadharBabu of Murarai
2. DurgaBabu, secretary ofRampurhat Congress Committee
3. One Gandhi of Rampurhat
4. Bhupen Sen,Kabiraj of Bolepur. [xxiii]
5. RadhaGovindo Sarkar of Khairasole (secretary, District Congress Committee)
6. Sourin Sen, Kabiraj of Dubrajpur, (general secretary District Krishak Committee)
7. KalikinkarMitra of Dubrajpur
8. PannalalDasgupta, Amar Kutir, Bolepur
9. Gopal Chandra Mondal (Secretary, Sainthia Congress Committee)
10. Dwarik Roy (president, Sainthia Congress committee) [xxiv]

The subjects for discussion in the meeting were as follows:

1. Election of chairman and vice-chairman of the district board
2. General discussion about the ideology of M.K. Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose and Bankim Mukherjee
3. Steps to be taken on 6 April

As regards election affairs in the district board it was decided by Saumyendranath Tagore that all possible attempts should be made to make Surendra Sarkar the chairman and two Muslims vice-chairmen. It was decided by Tagore after long discussion that in case of other parties joining the movement it will not look well for the Communist League to remain active. Saumyendranath Tagore asked the workers to be ready for the coming struggle. He was also going to form a secret group among his own from amongst the members of Calcutta and of different districts. Pannalal Dasgupta and Sourindra Narayan Sen were selected from Birbhum.[xxv]

***Movement in Bolepur on the price of paddy and to hold the production of paddy in the villages by CLI workers in 1940s:***

CLI workers of Bolepur proceeded to organize a movement demanding the decrease in the price of paddy during 1942. They also demanded that the government should stop seizing paddy from the peasants. Chandi Sarkar, Shakti Roy and Shanti Sarkar started to mobilize the peasants. Their demand was that “the price of rice should be 2paise per seer.” They also supported the cart-drivers of Bolepur regarding anti-rice exportation movement. On 19 August 1942, about 400 hundred cart-drivers agreed to take oath not to carry paddy for exportation under the CLI leaders at the Bolepur High School premises. [xxvi]

Communist League again organized a movement for the interest of rural people in the beginning of 1944 to hold the production of paddy in the villages by the instruction of Pannalal Dasgupta who was not then in the district. The aim was to create mass awareness so that the government was not able to buy paddy from them. They divided the district into 6 circles and appointed 10 workers for one circle. They marched through villages waving red flags and mobilized the peasants not to sell paddy to the government. From the second week of January 1944, the volunteers raised slogans like ‘Jan debotabudhandebona’ (will die but will not give paddy), ‘Juddheekpai-o na, ekbhai- o na’ (will not give a single paisa, or a single man for war), ‘Gramerdhangramerakho’ (keep the paddy of the village in the village), etc.[xxvii]

During 1944 most of the Communist League leaders like Durga Banerjee and Sourindranath Sen were arrested. Pannalal Dasgupta was busy in Assam, Bombay, Madras and Bengal. He became the most powerful leader of CLI in the absence of almost all CLI leaders along with Saumyendranath Tagore. But Pannalal was an absentee in Birbhum. His absence and arrest of the prominent CLI leaders led to the weakening of the Communist League.[xxviii]

### III. CONCLUSION

We can say that the workers of the CLI wanted to free the people of the agrarian society from the torture of the zamindars and their staffs, abwab and other illegal exaction, beggar system, tax of union board, Derabari system and wanted to increase the share of the share-croppers. The aim of the Communist League was not only to protect the peasants from tyranny and oppression but also to awaken revolutionary consciousness among the peasants for the socialist revolution. The formation of the Bangiyo Pradeshik Kisan Sabha under Saumyendranath Tagore in 1938 opened a new phase of the peasant movement in Bengal. His organization popularized radical demands such as the abolition of the zamindari system without giving any compensation, free distribution of land among the cultivators and agricultural labourers, minimization of revenue demands and cancellation of debts to the moneylenders. But due to the growth of rather similar associations or prajasamatis at the same time among the same sections, tenants were mobilized under diverse influences and their organization revealed a lot of internal variations and their struggle also remained separate.

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- [i] Henceforth, Saumyendranath Tagore would be simply referred to as "Saumyendranath".
- [ii] In August 1934 Saumyendranath formed the Communist League of India (hereafter CLI), a parallel organization of the CPI. At the time of its formation, there were five members of this organization, namely Saumyendranath, Sudhir Dasgupta, Prabhat Sen, Ranjit Majumdar and Arun Banerjee. A few years later the party changed its name to CPI. However, again it changed its name in 1942 as Revolutionary Communist Party of India (here after RCPI).
- [iii] File no. 166/26, I.B.
- [iv] In Birbhum Pannalal Dasgupta was the pioneer in organizing the peasants with a specific ideology. Pannalal Dasgupta was attracted towards Communism by Saumyendranath Tagore. He established night schools for the peasants and labourers under the banner of 'Amar Kutir'. In Bolepur and its neighbouring villages. Santhals and Hindu lower class people used to come in those night schools. His aim was to make people aware of the ideology of Communism and an oppression free society
- [v] File no. 166/26, I.B
- [vi] File no. 155/26, DIBO
- [vii] Birbhum Barta, 4th April 1938
- [viii] File no. 166/26, I.B
- [ix] The peasant organization of the CLI flourished in Dubrajpur and Khairasole police station area under the leadership of Surendranath Sarkar and Bhudeb Das. Surendranath was a very trust worthy follower of Pannalal Dasgupta.
- [x] File no. 166/26, I.B.
- [xi] File no. 55/1937, I.B
- [xii] Birbhum Barta, 25 April 1938
- [xiii] Birbhum Barta, 17 April 1939
- [xiv] File no -316/18, I.B
- [xv] Birbhum Barta, 25 April, 1938
- [xvi] File no. 166/26, I.B.
- [xvii] Birbhum Barta, 15 May 1939
- [xviii] Birbhum Barta, 17 April 1939
- [xix] File no -316/18, I.B
- [xx] Ibid.
- [xxi] Birbhum Barta, 13 February 1947
- [xxii] File no -316/18, I.B
- [xxiii] Enthusiastic youth of Bolpur. He came to know Saumyendranath Tagore at Rampurhat and after that he joined the CLI and established a Kabirajkhana at Bolepurhattala to carry on the political activities of the party. Along with his medical practice he kept a close relationship with the CLI activities. He brought some peasant activities to CLI party –like Shakti Roy of Hatsherandi village.
- [xxiv] File no. 166/26, I.B.
- [xxv] File no. 166/26, I.B.
- [xxvi] File no. 166/26, I.B.
- [xxvii] Banerjee, Durga, *Swadhinata Samajtantra O Ganatantrer Sangrame Birbhum* [Birbhum in the struggle for independence, socialism and democracy], pp.18-19, Sainthia, 1999
- [xxviii] File no. 166/26, I.B.