

Titu Meer's Rebellion : A Profile

SINCE the imposition of colonial rule in Bengal, a kind of continuity can be traced in the reactions of the peasantry through the outbreak of risings emerging from different moorings. The last four decades of the 18th century became stormy as the Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion, the Chakma movement, the Chuar revolt and the Rangpur rising were taking shape. In the same tradition of anti-colonial movements, Titu Meer's rebellion stood out strikingly in the first half of the 19th century. This uprising shook the colonial base in the countryside of Barasat sub-division of the 24 Parganas district during 1830-31.

As regards the source material for a study of Titu Meer's rebellion, we, however, still face the limitation of depending primarily on official records of the East India Company—Colvin's report (a report submitted by the Acting Joint Magistrate of Barasat to the Secretary of Government of Bengal in the Judicial Department in 1832) and other Judicial (Criminal) Proceedings preserved in the West Bengal State Archives. We also get glimpses of the uprising from contemporary press reports¹ which broadly sympathised with those who suppressed the rebellion. A little later W W Hunter came out with his publications² to provide a more sophisticated rationale for the colonial stand. The first Bengali book on Titu Meer was written in 1897 by Bihari Lal Sarkar who openly supported the interests of both the Hindu landholders and the officials of the East India Company. A somewhat balanced, though sketchy, viewpoint on the rebellion emerged from around the middle of the present century in the writings of W C Smith,³ in the publications of R G Mazumdar⁴ and S B Choudhuri⁵ and in the recent works of Sirajul Islam and others.⁶ But the perspective of a peasant rebellion was still missing. Some Leftist intellectuals⁷ gradually came forward to provide this crucial dimension, though the rigours of the historian's craft may be apparently lacking in some of their writings.

While we would try to appraise the pivotal perspective of peasant resistance as the major objective of this paper, we should first try to understand the level of perception of the rebel peasants in the social milieu of Bengal during the early 19th century. Otherwise we may ask

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questions which are not historically relevant. Thus, it was not unusual for a peasant to raise his voice of protest cloaked in a religious language in the feudal society of Bengal which we are referring to. Similarly anti-colonial movements in the initial phase often showed a partiality for the resurgence of the Mughal authority; the rebels during the so-called Sepoy Mutiny even used the aged Bahadur Shah as a symbol of their armed resistance. After appreciating these inhibiting factors, we can ask the basic question: how far could the uprisings put forward immediate grievances as well as long-ranging interests of the peasantry in the face of early colonial onslaughts? We would try to find the answer in Titu Meer's rebellion.

The decades following the Permanent Settlement (1793) witnessed in Bengal the growth of a class of new *zamindars* which came to be dominated by urban *bania* traders and erstwhile officials of old *zamindars*. The major aim of this new class was to procure, albeit forcibly, the increased land revenue for the East India Company. The relationship between the debt-ridden peasants and the new *zamindars* became tense from the beginning. The condition of the *ryots* deteriorated further after the introduction of indigo plantation. At the same time, the colonial policy, which had already replaced indigenous external trading in finished products of silk and cotton by one-way export of raw materials, now brought additional misery to the weavers by massive imports of factory-made cotton goods from Great Britain since the beginning of the 19th century. This deepening economic crisis provided the background for Titu Meer's rebellion.

The Beginning of the Rebellion

The rebellion, however, started from a different direction. Titu Meer (nee Meer Nisar Ali), the leader of the rising, hailed from a peasant family in the village of Haidarpur in Barasat sub-division of 24 Parganas district. In his early life Titu, as a bodyguard of a local *zamindar*, was arrested in a case. After his release, Titu went on pilgrimage to Mecca and met Saiyad Ahmad of Rae Bareilly who made a lasting impression on him. Saiyad Ahmad was a direct disciple of Abdul Wahab who had initiated a fundamentalist puritanical movement among the *Sunni* Muslims.⁸ The chief aim of this Wahabi movement was to purge all non-*Shariati* elements from the practices of the Muslims in order to regain Islam's glorious past. Saiyad Ahmad set out propagating that India had turned into '*Dar-ul-Harb*', i.e., a land ruled by infidels under the British rule, as the Indian Muslims had deviated from the path of true religion. The Muslims of the country, therefore, should once again pledge to follow strictly the instructions of *Koran* and *Hadith*, wage *jihad* against *Kafir* rulers, i.e., the British, and re-establish '*Dar-ul-Islam*', i.e., the rule of the believers, in India. In 1821 Saiyad Ahmad asked Titu Meer to go back and work among the Muslim peasants in his local area.⁹

After returning to his village, Titu began to organise the Muslim peasantry by propagating two major themes. First, veneration of *pirs*, erection of *dargahs*, holding of *faits* in memory of the dead, etc, were un-Islamic practices and should be abandoned by the true Muslims. Although these were part of the tradition of folkish Islam of Bengal, yet when Titu pointed out to the poor cultivators that these practices benefited only the parasitic *mollahs* who enjoyed the patronage of Muslim landlords, the peasants saw the point. Charging interest on loans was un-Islamic, but the *mollahs* had never protested against it. Secondly, the rule of the infidel Britishers with the help of oppressive *zamindars* and *talukdars* had accentuated the plight of the peasantry.

At that time, the poor peasants in the Barasat sub-division consisted of *Aslaf Sheikhs* or *Jolabs* as well as the low-caste Hindus like *Bagdis* and *Kaivarttas*. The local *zamindars* and *talukdars*, along with their *naihs* and *gomasthas*, were predominantly Hindus, though there were some Muslim *talukdars* with *Saiyad*, *Pathan* and *Mughal* connections. The *muhajans* or money-lenders were mostly Hindus. The *Jolabs*, the most depressed stratum of the local Muslim society, were the first to respond to Titu's call. Though Titu was occasionally speaking for the peasantry in general, his emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism could not draw the poor Hindu peasants at the outset and they remained neutral. But it is noteworthy that the landholders, both Hindus and Muslims, as well as the *mollahs* reacted sharply against Titu Meer's preaching from the beginning.

In June 1830, provocative action was unleashed by Krishnadeb Ray, the *talukdar* of *mauja* Sarfarajpur, who imposed on the bearded Wahabi peasants a special tax of Rs 2½ per year with the possible motive of isolating Titu Meer's followers. He sent out a force of 300 armed guards to collect the tax forcibly. The peasants rushed to Titu for advice. An enraged Titu declared that the tax was both a religious offensive and an economic pressure on the poor Muslim peasants who should refuse to obey the *talukdar*. The peasants responded to the call and none turned up to pay the tax. "With reference to Mr. Colvin's Report regarding Kishan Dev Rai, the Zemindar", his "oppressive and illegal exactions appear to have first aroused the Ryots to opposition".¹⁰ A frustrated Krishnadeb led a party of more than 100 followers (armed with sticks and lances) and burnt down a number of cottages of the Wahabi peasants after destroying a mosque. The peasants put up a stiff resistance and the confrontation was inconclusive. Krishnadeb immediately fled and remained in hiding at Calcutta for a few days. Shortly afterwards, both the parties lodged complaints at the local Baduria police station. Meanwhile Krishnadeb had heavily bribed Ramrao Chakraborty, the concerned officer-in-charge, and made him submit a report favourable to him. Ultimately the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Barasat dismissed both the cases, but he extracted an unilateral bond from the peasants to the effect that they would not

commit any breach of the peace in the near future.

The local *zamindars* and *talukdars* were following the whole incident with keen interest, as all of them had long been looking for opportunities for the imposition of additional taxes. Thus Ramnarayan Nag Chaudhuri, the *zamindar* of Taragonia, and Guruprasad Chaudhuri, the *talukdar* of Nagarpur, jointly extended their cooperation to Krishnadeb Ray. These landholders began to demand from their *ryots* arrear rents with interest at short notice. They also misused their powers to arrest the tenants for arrear of rent which were granted under the Act (Regulation 7) of 1799.

The peasants responded by setting up a spontaneous organisation and by initiating certain criminal cases against some *zamindars* at the Court of District and Sessions Judge at Alipur, headquarters of 24 Parganas. A turning point came in Titu Meer's movement. Titu understood that the landholders with direct or indirect help from the British rulers were unleashing an offensive as soon as the peasants were getting organised, no matter whether they were Muslims or Hindus. The time had come when he must uplift his socio-religious agitation to a full-fledged economic-political movement and put up armed resistance against any offensive of the landholding class; in the process, he should be finally prepared to face armed confrontation with the East India Company itself. Titu made the poor peasants understand the futility of taking legal steps against the *zamindars*, which meant asking for justice from the partisan English judges, and persuaded them to withdraw the pending cases. Almost all poor Muslim cultivators of the locality gradually came forward to participate in Titu's organisational activities. Even the low-caste Hindu peasants were no longer apathetic, though they still did not involve themselves actively. *Fakir* Miskin Shah, along with his followers, joined hands with Titu. But it should be noted that Titu Meer sought neither religious inspiration from the *mollahs* nor financial assistance from the Muslim *zamindars* and *talukdars*.

The Subsequent Course of the Rebellion

Titu now shifted his headquarters from Haidarpur to Narkelberia and organised his peasant supporters into militia armed with easily available weapons, like bows-and-arrows, spears, lances and swords. In October 1830 Titu issued a declaration which openly proclaimed that he and his supporters were "masters of the country, asserting that the period of the British rule had expired and that the Mahomedans from whom the English had usurped it were the rightful owners of the empire".¹¹ Titu next decreed that all *zamindars* and *talukdars* of the locality should remit revenues to him and not to the British treasury and that anybody flouting this order would be severely punished.¹² In fact, on October 14, 1830, Titu's militia looted the property of a Muslim landholder of Khaspur who dared to disobey the order. Titu also asked

the *ryots* not to pay rent to the *zamindars* who were opposing his movement and not to pay illegal cesses at all. Some *zamindars* and *talukdars* fled to Calcutta, as the local police became ineffective.

Titu Meer now turned his attention to humiliating Krishnadeb Roy, his old enemy. On October 31, 1830, Titu himself led a 300-strong militia and raided Krishnadeb's residence at Sarfarajpur. The nearby market was ransacked and the establishments of corrupt money-lenders (like, Lakshman Deb, Mohan Saha, Golak Saha and others) were set on fire. Finally, as a retaliation against Krishnadeb's destruction of a mosque nearly four months back, a cow was slaughtered by Titu's men in front of a local temple.

Immediately after this fateful raid, the landholders of 24 Parganas and of the adjacent Nadia district held a conference for mutual assistance in the event of Titu's offensive in the near future. The notorious European indigo planters of the locality anticipated with their class instinct that they were soon going to be the target of the rebellious peasants. The planters, therefore, hurried to extend their cooperation to the *zamindars*, though their relationship was not always cordial before.

Kaliprasanna Mukherjee, the *zamindar* of Habra-Gobardanga, was a representative of this new alliance and he refused to send revenue to Titu Meer. He also did not forgo the collection of additional and illegal taxes from his *ryots*. Titu took up the challenge and moved towards Gobardanga with his peasant militia. Davies, the manager of an indigo plantation at Mollahati, rushed to Kaliprasanna's help with 200 armed guards. But Davies had to beat a hasty retreat in the face of a strong encirclement by Titu's men. He himself escaped narrowly and took shelter with Debnath Roy, the *zamindar* of Gobra-Gobindapur. After defeating the combined forces of Kaliprasanna and Davies, Titu made up his mind to punish Debnath Roy and marched towards Gobra-Gobindapur. At Laughati in Nadia, Debnath with his guards confronted Titu's militia. In the fierce encounter Debnath was defeated and killed.

Titu now pounced upon the estates of indigo planters spread over Barasat and Basirhat sub-divisions of 24 Parganas and in parts of Nadia. These European lease-holders were singularly oppressive and had reduced their *ryots* to virtual serfdom. One after another, the indigo establishments were set on fire. "The papers were destroyed, most probably by the villagers, for the purpose of destroying the records of their own debts."¹³

By the beginning of November 1830 the situation had clearly gone beyond the control of *zamindars* and planters. "From 8th to 15th of the month they (the rebels) remained gradually increasing in numbers and confidence, acting in short in open contempt of all authority."¹⁴ By the middle of November the East India Company's Commissioner of Presidency Division had already received various reports on Titu's rebellious activities from officers-in-charge of the affected *thanas* as

well as from planters like Davies and Storm. The Commissioner asked the District Magistrates of 24 Parganas and Nadia to take necessary steps immediately. Accordingly, Alexander, the Joint Magistrate of Barasat, along with the officer-in-charge of Baduria *thana*, led a police force of 120 and entered the *mauza* of Narkelberia on November 13, 1830.

Titu had prior information of Alexander's expedition. He at once sent a militia of 500 armed peasants under the leadership of his nephew, Golam Masum, who outnumbered the police force in open encounter. The Joint Magistrate somehow fled to the nearby village of Kalinga in Nadia. The encounter resulted in the death of Ramram Chakraborti, the hated officer-in-charge of Baduria *thana*. Among the other dead were a *jamadar*, 10 constables and 3 *bargandazes* of the police force.¹⁵

After this success, Titu Meer declared himself *Badsah*, following vaguely the erstwhile Mughal style. He appointed one Mainuddin, a *Jolah* of Rudrapur, his *wazir* and his nephew Golam Masum the chief *senapati*.¹⁶ About 8000 poor peasants, both Muslim and Hindu, hailing from different villages around Narkelberia, came forward to join Titu's organisation which now held its sway over a substantial territory in Barasat sub-division. In this 'liberated' area Titu carried out a sort of peasants' autonomous government in a limited way for nearly a year. The local *zamindars* were either brought to submission or asked to vacate their territories. The peasants themselves collected taxes, administered justice and maintained internal law and order. However, Titu could well realise that, consequent upon his declaration of autonomy, he would soon have to face the mighty onslaught from the East India Company's forces. He, therefore, felt the necessity to fortify the village of Narkelberia, his centre of resistance. This led to the construction of the famous *banser kella* or the bamboo-fortress, which the peasants built with incredible speed.¹⁷ They divided the fortress into several sectors and stored foodstuffs and their weapons, like swords, lances, knives, bows and poisonous arrows.

Meanwhile, the *zamindars* and the planters of 24 Parganas, Nadia and Jessore started approaching Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General, for direct armed intervention. In response to their pleadings, Bentinck gave instructions to Smith, the District Magistrate of Nadia, to proceed with sufficient armed policemen for crushing the rebels. On the morning of November 17, 1831, Smith, along with David Andrews, the planter, and four other English Magistrates moved towards Narkelberia at the head of a 300 strong armed police force. The landholders assisted this expedition by providing Smith with a considerable number of armed guards and elephants.

Golam Masum, Titu's *senapati*, had prior information of this expedition. Without waiting at Narkelberia, he immediately marched with a militia of 1500 armed peasants and met Smith's forces near

Baraghar (5 km to the north-east of Narkelberia). In the frontal encounter, heavy firing from guns and muskets of the armed police contingent had little effect on Titu's men who outflanked the enemy forces by overwhelming numbers and defeated them with local weapons. The English officers crossed the Ichhamati river and took shelter in the residence of Davies, the planter. Smith quickly sent an urgent note to the Governor-General on November 17, 1831: "After what I have myself witnessed of the spirit, resolution and fanaticism of this most extraordinary body of men, whose numbers could not have been less than 1500, in league with all the surrounding villages, I have no hesitation making the most urgent representation to Government of the absolute necessity for prompt and efficient aid."¹⁸

Lord Bentinck at once understood the need for intervention by army and on November 18 he sent down a full-fledged military force under the command of Major Scott, Lieutenant Shakespeare and Captain Sutherland containing a cavalry and an artillery with 300 armed personnel and two cannons. The only civilian officer who accompanied the army was Alexander, the Joint Magistrate of Barasat. This force reached Narkelberia on the evening of November 18 and laid a siege around the *banser kella* (bamboo-fortress). Meanwhile most of Titu's militia had already returned and taken position within the fortress. Nothing much happened that evening.

The historic battle started on the morning of November 19. In the face of continuous firing from rifles and cannons of the British army, Titu's militia put up a valiant resistance for three hours with arrows, spears, lances and muskets. Titu, though injured, fought to the last, inspiring his fellow peasant warriors throughout the desperate battle. Finally the bamboo-fortress was destroyed by constant shelling from the cannons. The English army officials entered the fortress and bayoneted Titu to painful death.¹⁹ Fifty of his comrades were also killed. Alexander, the Joint Magistrate, decided to cremate the dead instead of burying, "as their leader Titu Meer is among them and they (the peasants) might take his body and bury him as martyr".²⁰

About 800 rebels were arrested and sent for trial at Alipur Court. After protracted trial, nearly 140 peasants were punished with prison terms of various duration. Golam Masum, Titu's *senapati* and nephew, was sentenced to death and, according to the order, was hanged in Narkelberia in front of the devastated *banser kella* where his body was kept "exposed as a warning to other rebels".²¹

The Significance of the Rising

Though Titu Meer's fortress was destroyed, the historical significance of his rising could not be suppressed. Titu challenged the very basis of colonial exploitation in our country which depended on land revenue and other exactions from the peasantry. By rebelling against the whole exploitative system he succeeded in uprooting locally the

administration of the East India Company and its stooges – the *zamindars* and the planters – for more than a year. Simultaneously, Titu established in the liberated areas of Barasat sub-division a self-government for the peasants for a limited period. Who helped him in this uphill task? There was none excepting the poor and illiterate cultivators of the locality. Titu himself came from a peasant family and he never allowed the leadership of his movement to go out of the grips of the peasants and the weavers. In our country the leadership of anti-colonial peasant revolts and earlier risings of the *ryots* against the Mughals had often passed into the hands of so-called rebel *zamindars*. Titu's uprising did not suffer from this limitation and, hence, there was no scope in it for any compromise whatsoever. While our educated leaders of 'Bengal Renaissance' were collaborating with 'liberal' Lord Bentinck for carrying out their highly acclaimed social reforms within the framework of loyalty to the British crown, the unlettered peasant militia of Titu Meer challenged that very colonial framework and fought with arrows and spears against rifles and cannons of the Company's forces which were sent by the same 'liberal' Bentinck.

It is interesting to note how the contemporary Bengali middle class and the European residents in and around Calcutta reacted to Titu Meer's rebellion through their press. The English-owned journals and those controlled by the Christian missionaries were understandably pro-government in their attitude towards the rebellion. Nonetheless, a conservative journal like *John Bull* tried to probe into the origin of the rising. "It is doubtful how far fanaticism has anything to do with this disturbance. It rather seems to have arisen from absolute want and starvation."²² But the mouthpieces of the Bengali Hindu middle class, like Young Bengal's *Jnananveshan* and Dharma Sabha's *Somachar-Chandrika*, sided totally with the interests of the *zamindars* as well as of the Company and denounced the rebellion as a disturbing law-and-order problem. *Somachar-Chandrika* even went on to put on a communal colouring on the uprising. From the *Reformer*, however, we come to know that a sizable section of the Muslims in Calcutta supported Titu Meer's movement.²³ Colvin's report had also indicated that a Muslim police officer of Kalinga *thana* in Nadia was partisan to the rebels and was subsequently dismissed from office.²⁴

Titu's rebellion, however, had its limitations, too. The first flush of victories created an illusion of easy success, and Titu failed on the tactical front as he opted for open confrontation in his final battle against the better equipped adversaries. Nor did he have the perception of a comprehensive programme for his peasant followers when he set out to replace the existing colonial system. An equally serious limitation lay in his emphasis on Islamic puritanical resurgence which, though not communal, isolated the poor Hindu peasants from his movement during its early phase. Titu, however, got over these religious fetters and gradually directed the main thrust of his rebellion successfully against

the *zamindars*, the planters and the British administrators.²⁵ In the ultimate analysis Titu's rising turned out as a distinct manifestation of determined class struggle of the poor peasants against the colonial rule in Bengal. "The movement made use of religious ideology, as class struggles in pre-industrialistic society have often done; but though religious it was not communalist."²⁶

In spite of the brutal repression unleashed by the colonial rulers, the Wahabi movement could not be suppressed immediately. Within a few years of Titu's death, two disciples of Saiyad Ahmad—Unayat Ali and Enayet Ali—became active in Bengal and Bihar, and their organisation soon spread to other provinces also. During the great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 the Wahabis came forward to extend its dimension by providing the mutineers with peasant bases in certain areas. Till 1870 these peasant rebels, in the garb of puritanical religious sects, put up stiff resistance against the British rule. In the stormy annals of anti-colonial peasant struggles in our country, Titu Meer and Wahabi followers appeared as petrels with a message for a future peasant society, shorn of repression and exploitation.

1 Swapan Basu, while editing the publication of Biharlal Sarkar on Titu Meer, has systematically collected the contemporary press reports on the rebellion in his book (in Bengali), *Titu Meer: Biharlal Sarkar*, Calcutta, 1981, pp 61-84.

2 W W Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans* (2nd ed), London, 1872; and *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol I, London, 1875.

3 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, Lahore, 1943

4 Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, vol I, Calcutta, 1971.

5 Sashi Bhusan Chaudhuri, *Civil Disturbances during the British Rule in India (1765-1857)*, Calcutta, 1955.

6 Sirajul Islam, Md. Abdur Rahim, Addul Momin Chaudhury and A P Mahmud, *Bangladesh Itihas* (in Bengali), Dacca, 1977.

7 Narahari Kabiraj, "The Revolt of Titu Mir—a communal outburst or a peasant rising?", in *Problems of National Liberation*, vol I, No. 1.

Suprakash Roy, *Bharater Krishak Bidroha O Ganatantrik Sangram* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1972.

Benoy Ghosh, "Titu Meerer Dharma O Bidroha" (in Bengali), *Ekkhan*, vol 10, No. 6, 1973.

An able compilation of the factual narrations and the views of Suprakash Roy and Benoy Ghosh can be available in the latest series of *West Bengal District Gazetteers, 24 Pargans District* (in press), Chapter 2.

8 Sirajul Islam and others, *Bangladesh Itihas* (in Bengali), Dacca, 1977, p 469.

9 Bengal judicial (Criminal) Cons. No. 5, 1832.

10 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. No. 7, 1832.

11 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. No. 11, August 5, 1833.

12 *The Calcutta Monthly Journal*, December 1831, pp 83-84.

13 *The Government Gazette*, November 24, 1831.

14 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. 5, April 4, 1832.

15 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. No. 10, 1832.

16 Biharlal Sarkar, *Titu Meer* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1897, p 41.

17 Suprakash Roy, *Mukti Juddhe Bharatiya Krishak*, Calcutta, 1980, p 34.

18 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. No. 81, November 22, 1831.

- 19 Suprakash Roy, *Mukti Juddha Bharatiya Krishak*, Calcutta, 1980. p 35.
- 20 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. No.78, 1831.
- 21 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. No. 11, August 5, 1833.
- 22 *John Bull*, reprinted in the *Government Gazette*, November 21, 1831.
- 23 *Reformer*, December 5, 1831.
- 24 Bengal Judicial (Criminal) Cons. No. 5, April 3, 1832.
- 25 Benoy Ghosh, "Titu Meerer Dharma O Bidroha" (in Bengali). *Ekkhan*, vol 10, No. 6, 1973, p 20.
- 26 W C Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, Lahore, 1913, p 189.