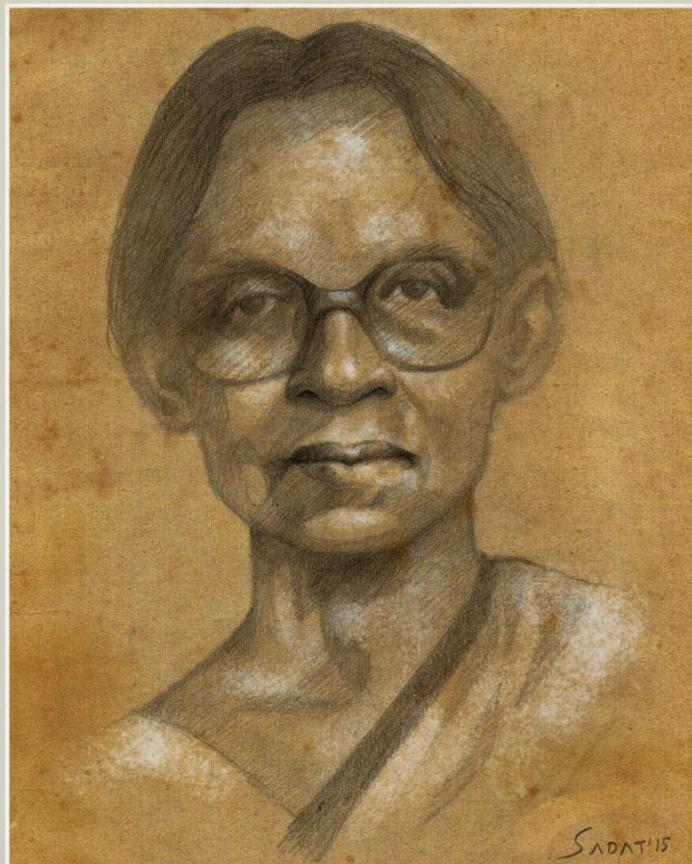


# 90TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY ILA MITRA REVOLUTIONARY, TRAILBLAZER

*Ila Mitra was the legendary peasant leader of undivided Bengal, a veteran front runner of the communist movement in the sub-continent and a dedicated friend to the cause of our Liberation War in 1971. Nachol, a police station at that time of greater Rajshahi, became the centre of the peasant movement, known as Tebhaga Andolan in the district. Ila Mitra, an athlete of no mean calibre, became deeply involved in the movement encouraged by her husband, ultimately becoming 'Rani Ma' (queen-mother) of the peasants of the locality. But who is Ila Mitra to the present generation, particularly of Bangladesh?*

Ajoy Roy



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**I**LA SEN was the daughter of a simple middle-class government service holder, from a village named Bagutia in the then Jenidah Subdivision of Jessore district. Ila was born on October 18, 1925. She completed her education in Calcutta and passed her BA with honours in Bengali literature in 1944. She finally obtained her MA degree in Bangla literature and culture from Calcutta University as a private candidate in 1958 after 13 long years of completing her BA. Why did it take so long? Well, that is part of her story.

It might be a surprise to many of us that such a political personality was a champion athlete in her school and college days. In the 1930s, she was a star in the world of sports in Bengal. She was selected to represent India in athletics in the Olympic games scheduled to be held in 1940 in Japan, which however could not be held because of World War II. In 1944, she got married to Ramendra Nath Mitra, who, even though a son of a Zamindar family of Ramchandrapur, was himself an organiser of the communist movement in Maldah.

The couple had a son in 1948, while Ila Mitra was organising a peasant movement in the locality of Nachol under the directives of CPI.

## ILA MITRA AND THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT

Ila became active in the communist movement in the early 1940s, becoming a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) at the age of 18. After her marriage, when she moved to Ramchandrapur, Ramendra Mitra encouraged her to take part in the communist movement as she had as a student in Calcutta. When a riot broke out in Calcutta, Bihar and some parts of East Bengal, she went to Noakhali under CPI's directives, extensively touring affected areas together with Mahatma Gandhi and other Hindu-Muslim leaders, and took part in rehabilitation work among the distressed people. This was the first time that she transcended the confines of a conservative Hindu family, and came directly in contact with the masses.

After the partition of Bengal in 1947, party leaders, including Ila Mitra, were asked to go underground because of repression of the communist party in Pakistan. This was in 1948 - Ila was then pregnant. She crossed over to Calcutta to give birth to her son, Mohan, whom she left under the care of her mother-in-law at Ramchandrapur.

She then returned to Nachol (which, even now, is an inaccessible area) undercover to give leadership to the peasant movement with her husband. The local peasant leaders with the help of the underground communist and Kishan Samity leaders worked relentlessly to prepare the ground of the Tebhaga movement in that locality from 1948-1950. It may be remembered that at the time when the Tebhaga movement was gaining momentum under the fiery leadership of Ila Mitra, the movement in other districts of East Bengal had been crushed by the Muslim League government.

In the area of Nachol, the *jotdars* used to get two-thirds share, while only one-third went to the cultivator, instead of half as in other districts of north Bengal. For husking rice from paddy, the labourers used to get only three Aras out of 20 Aras. The objective of the movement, in very simple terms, was to ensure that, out of the total yield, two-thirds share went to the cultivator, and one-third to the jotdar, and out of 20 Aras of husked rice, the labourer received seven Aras.

Ila extensively toured the villages, met with farm workers, common cultivators and small farmers and publicly addressed the peasant meetings in the remote corners of the villages, all the while bluffing the police

administration. In this way she earned the title 'Rani Ma'.

Once the ground was ripe, the final phase of the movement was launched to implement the Tebhaga doctrine. The movement subsequently took a violent form, led by a defence force from among the revolutionary peasants, in which the Santal community was the main element of force. By 1950 almost all landowners in and around Nachol were either persuaded or forced to accept the 'Sat Ari & Tebhaga doctrine'.

The strategy the peasant leaders adopted was simple but effective. After the crops of a particular field were harvested, the owner of the land was invited to be present on a given

defence force could not resist any more-- they had to give in. Hundreds of Santals members were killed. Villagers were forced to leave the country to escape inhuman repression at the hands of law enforcing agencies.

The peasant comrades insisted that they take their Rani Ma to the other side of the border. But Ila refused to move, until all her comrades in arms were also safe. Consequently, she and hundreds comrades were arrested. And in the Nachol police station began the inhuman torture. The police repeatedly asked the tortured peasants to admit that it was Ila Mitra who led the fight on that day and killed a number of policemen. But no one confessed - around 50

or five sepoy forced me to lie down on my back, and one pushed a hot egg through my private parts. I felt like I was being burnt with fire, and became unconscious.

When I came back to my senses in the morning of the 9th, the S.I. and some sepoy came into my cell and began to kick me on the belly with their boots on. Thereafter a nail was pierced through my right heel. I was then lying half conscious, and heard the S.I. muttering: "We are coming again at night, and if you do not confess, one by one the sepoy will ravish you". At the dead of night, the S.I. and his sepoy came back and the threat was repeated. But as I still refused to say anything, three or four men got hold of me, and a sepoy began to rape me. Shortly

darkness.... Sometimes I could hear the voice of the judge, but again everything went back to nothingness."

As her condition at Rajshahi jail deteriorated, she was brought to Dhaka Central Jail and subsequently moved to Dhaka Medical College almost on the brink of death in 1953. Her condition became a great concern for the conscious people of the time. Ila Mitra was brought to DMC hospital where every day, hundreds of students, elites, and political leaders of all shades used to visit her. The East Bengal Legislative Assembly, Moulana Bhasani and some other leaders issued statements expressing their concerns and urging the state to release her. In mid-June, 1954, Ila Mitra was released on parole and allowed to go to Calcutta for medical treatment.

Within 4-5 years she came back to life, joined the party activities gradually and completed her M.A in Bangla in 1957 as a private candidate. She joined Calcutta City College (south) as a professor of Bangla. This she had to do for a living, as her husband was a full-timer in CPI politics. She gradually became involved in West Bengal politics, getting elected as member of West Bengal Assembly four times from 1967-78.

## A FRIEND AND CO-FIGHTER

When the Pakistan Government came to know that Ila had recovered from illness, the central government repeatedly asked the Indian government to send her back to Pakistan as she was still a convict in a murder case. But her well-wishers resisted the move, knowing what fate awaited her under that regime.

Although Comrade Mitra could not return to East Pakistan, she, throughout her life, never forgot the people of East Bengal, her second homeland. She constantly monitored the political and social development in East Bengal. During our liberation war in 1971, her house and party office were an open shelter for many of us. She was a friend, a co-fighter. She acted like a true daughter of Bangladesh. It was her war also for liberating the occupied land and its people. She remembered those days in this way:

"To fight as co-fighter with the people of Bangladesh and attaining their friendship had become my foremost duty; to me it was an opportunity to repay my debts to the people of Bangladesh from whom I received so much -- my life, my own liberation. Those people had released me from the confines of my in-law's house and from the prison of Pakistani jail-- how could I forget them in their distress? Can I lag behind in their fight for freedom?"

Immediately after independence, in 1972 and then again in 1974, she came to Bangladesh to attend a conference of Bangladesh Teachers' Association. On the last occasion, during a courtesy meeting with the Bangabandhu, he told her that Bangladesh considers the Mitra couple as its son and daughter. He further told her that he would bring them back as citizens of Bangladesh. However, before his plan could be materialised, Bangabandhu himself was assassinated by anti-Bangladeshi forces within a year.

We remember comrade Ila Mitra as a legendary personality of Bangladesh. She made sacrifices for the oppressed peasants and common masses. She will remain immortal for her role in sharing the struggles of the people of Bangladesh. In our struggle for true democracy she will be our constant and infinite source of inspiration.

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Left: Ila Mitra at Dhaka Medical College Gate after being released from jail in 1954. Right: A young Ila Mitra poses with her awards in athletics.



PHOTOS: MARXIST INDIANA

day, along with the leaders of the movement, common villagers and the cultivator. The crop was divided in three parts -- the cultivator kept two-thirds, and the rest was sent to the owner. The landowners were forced to accept the distribution.

The process of implementation was smooth for the most part, except in a few cases when force had to be employed. However, to the administration and landowners, the movement constituted an illegal 'looting of yields' by force. The government could not sit idle particularly when the landowners, jotdars, and zamindars collectively and individually appealed to the administration to end this 'terrorism' of the peasants. The landowners, with the help of the police, let loose a reign of terror and oppression on villages to subdue the movement. Many peasant activists and innocent people were tortured and taken into police custody.

On January 7, about 2000 soldiers arrived in Nachol and set fire to 12 villages, ransacked countless houses and killed many villagers as they moved in towards Chandipur village. The army was supported by armed police and ansars. They moved from door to door in search of the wanted leaders.

An unequal fighting began -- on the one side thousands of Santal, Hindu and Muslim peasants comprising the defence force of Tebhaga and on other side, the army, police and ansars armed with modern fire arms. The

- 100 peasants died in police torture.

Then came the unimaginable torture on Ila Mitra herself. Her fault was-- she was a woman, a Hindu, a communist and, above all, she led the Tebhaga rebellion with arms. The process and methods of repression and torture were beastly and totally devoid of any humanity. It was a glaring example of how a civilised government uses its state machinery to brutally torture its own citizens in the name of extracting a confession.

In November 1950, the case of killing ASI of Nachol was formally opened at the court. Manorama Masima, legendary political and women's rights activist, insisted that she give a vivid statement about what happened at Nachol police station. Bhanu Devi, a comrade, cautioned her if she did not disclose the full truth of torture on her body including sexual violence she would recommend to the party leadership for discontinuing Ila's membership. All her co-prisoners encouraged her to tell the truth. Inspired by their advice, she decided to give her statement even at the cost of her personal and family honour. Here we provide an excerpt from that statement: "No food was given to me, not even a drop of water. The same day in the evening the sepoy began to beat me on the head with the butt of their guns, in the presence of the S.I. I was profusely bleeding through the nose. Afterwards... Inside the cell again the S.I. ordered the sepoy to bring four hot eggs, and said, now she will talk. Thereafter four

afterwards I became unconscious. Next day on 10-1-50, when I became conscious again, I found that I was profusely bleeding and my cloth was drenched in blood. I was in that state taken to Nawabganj from Nachole. The sepoy in Nawabganj jail gate received me with smart blows."

**I**LAMITRA was charged with directly murdering sepoy and an ASI. The charge sheet reported that she was the main leader who instigated the peasants against the landowners, jotdars and zamindars, organised the so-called Tebhaga Movement, forcibly looted yields etc. She was also accused of leading the unlawful assembly of peasants in Chandipur village on 5th January, '50. She, along with all others accused, was sentenced to life imprisonment.

However, her medical condition deteriorated in prison; perhaps her illness was caused and/or aggravated by the ill-treatment and torture she underwent in police custody. At Rajshahi central jail, she was in a state of mental and physical breakdown. She described her deplorable condition as such:

"Sometimes, the happy moment of giving birth to my son and of the following sixteen days flashed in front of my eyes, but immediately faded away... I didn't know where my husband, who was then still in hiding with a warrant of arrest in his name, was... I couldn't remember any sweet memory of my past life... all seemed lost in the