

## A HISTORICAL CASE STUDY ON *HAT TOLA* MOVEMENT IN JALPAIGURI DISTRICT IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Hat Tola movement was an integral character of the peasant movement in Jalpaiguri district. Toll collections were made in Boda, Debiganj, Pachagarh and other adjacent areas. It remained an extensive practice in Jalpaiguri, both in the khasmahal areas and permanently settled the tract, and other districts of Bengal. The aims of the study are to establishment of new aspects of the peasant movement through this agitation.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Hat Tola, Zamindars, Ijaradars, Tax, Movement*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Hat tola movement was an integral character of peasant movement in Jalpaiguri district. Peasants were bound to give tola (cess) to the agents of zamindars, zotedars, ijaradars, and British followers when they were selling goods in the hat (weekly market). Toll collections were made in Boda, Debiganj, Pachagarh and other adjacent areas. It remained an extensive practice in Jalpaiguri, both in the khasmahal areas and the permanently settled tract, and other districts of Bengal. In view of widespread protest against this practice, the Government of Bengal made an enquiry in 1940. It was predictable that in that year there were about 6,000 hats in the province owned mostly by local zamindars who either managed them with their own staff or leased them out to ijaradars on a yearly rent. In almost all of these hats tolls were collected at excessive rates. Peasants were always exploited by the agents of zamindars, zotedars, ijaradars and that affected all sections of the peasantry and even small and middle class jotdars also. As a result they tried to protest against the exploiters forestablishing their rights.*

### **Nature of Hat Tola**

The tola was collected from not only the sellers, but in some cases also from the buyers.<sup>1</sup>The following table gives us an approximate idea of the tolls levied at a hat in the year 1939:

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<sup>1</sup> Das Gupta, Ranajit, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal, Jalpaiguri, 1869-1947*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, Bombay Calcutta, Madras, 1992, p.182

Table 1: Tolls Levied at a *Hat* in the Year 1939

Sl. No.	Commodity	Load	Value	Toll Levices
1.	Vegetables	Head	Up to Rs. 2	3 to 6 piece
2.	Vegetable	Bhar/Cart	Rs. 2 to Rs. 5	As. 1
3.	Parched rice	Bhar	Rs. 2 to Rs. 5	As. 1
4.	Pulse, Salt etc.	Head/Bhar	Rs. 5 to Rs 10	As. Toas. 2
5.	Fish	—	Rs. 3 to Rs 5	As. 1
6.	Fowls	—	Rs. 2 to Rs. 4	As. 1
7.	Goats	—	Rs. 5 to Rs. 10	As. 2
8.	Paddy/rice	Cart	Rs. 20 to Rs. 30	As. 2 to as.4

Source: Das Gupta, Ranajit, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal, Jalpaiguri, 1869-1947*, Delhi:

Oxford University Press, Bombay Calcutta Madras, 1992, p. 183

In some *hats*, *zamindars* and *ijaradars* used to collect Rs. 2 per cow and Rs 4 per bull as operating cost for issuing receipts certifying such sales. The Senior Marketing Officer, Government of Bengal, conducting this investigation estimated that the income of a *zamindar* or an *ijaradar* from a *hat* was usually between Rs. 1,500 to Rs. 3,000 per *annum*.<sup>2</sup> Obviously enough, such toll collection had been a major issue of peasant unhappiness in different districts of Bengal in the past and from time to time there was trouble around this issue. Jalpaiguri district witnessed such troubles frequently. That turbulence was, however, basically of a periodic nature. But in the later part of 1939, this displeasure found coordinated manifestation in parts of Jalpaiguri as well as the neighbouring Dinajpur district.

Within the Boda, Debiganj and Pachagarh *thana* areas the *hats* were either directly owned and controlled by the Cooch Bihar Raj Estate and Baikunthapur Estate or leased out by these two estates to powerful big *jotedars* of the areas. Like elsewhere in Bengal, in these areas too the *hat* owners and *ijaradars* exacted taxes from the stall holders as well as the peasants who came to the *hat* to sell or purchase a little at steep rates. The tax was exacted in some cases in cash and in some other cases in a manner. In the case of cash collection, there was a fixed, though quite high, rate. In the case of collection in kind, the amount was extracted totally illogically. Even the poor peasants and *adhiars* who sold only a little *seers* of paddy or a meager quantity of vegetables or some poultry products, usually a few eggs or some milk, not safe. Such a tax was collected from the purchasers too. This was a form of operation that affected all sections of the peasantry and even small and middle class *jotedars*. A variety of other sections of rural population, such as teachers, village doctors, small shopkeepers etc. too were subjected to this exaction.

### Origin of the Movement

When the exploitations were unbearable the peasants were compelled to protest against the exploiters. In pursuance of the District Krishak Samity Conference resolution, the peasants were called upon to decline payment of *tola*. A movement around this issue took place towards the end of 1939. The first act took place at the Maidan Dighi *hat* under Boda P.S. With red flags and lathis kishan volunteers marched in to the *hat* and raised slogans – ‘No *tola* payment by the *Kishan*’; ‘Destroy the *zamindari* system’, ‘Down with the exploitation of the *zamindars* and *ijaradars*’ etc.<sup>3</sup> The *ijaradar* of *hat* did not remain a silent observer. He and his hired men had always threatened the peasants. The police *daroga* took the

<sup>2</sup> Bose, Sugata, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, New York: Cambridge University Press, December 2007, pp. 74-75

<sup>3</sup> Das Gupta, Ranajit, *op. cit.*, p. 183

side of the *ijaradar*. But his involvement too failed to brow beat the peasants. Later on, the Sadar S.D.O. came and in his presence a meeting was held. The *Kishan Sabha* leaders were asked to send their representatives. Gurudas Roy of Mohit Nagar, Madhab Datta, the founder of the *Kishan Sabha* in the district, did not go to the meeting. As an alternative, they sent a peasant delegation under the leadership of Radhamohan Barman, a local Rajbansi peasant cadre. Eventually a compromise settlement was arrived at. The assertion of the peasant right, the fact that they themselves could argue their case before the *jotedars* and *ijaradars* and even a powerful government official as equals, and the achievement of a settlement in their favour gave new confidence to the peasants.<sup>4</sup>

### Extent of the Movement

The movement against *tola* collection did not remain restricted to the areas within the Jalpaiguri district and soon spread to neighbouring areas in the Dinajpur district. *Kali's fair* held every year during the days of *Kali puja* at Dumduma, situated within the Thjakurgaon Subdivision of Dinajpur district and divided from the Jalpaiguri district by a river called *Bhulli*, was famous as a centre for cattle purchase and sale. Thousands of people from Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Rangpur and even from nearby Bihar districts came to the *mela*. The *zamindar* to whose estate the *mela* ground belonged, employed his men for recording the sale and purchase of cattle and issuing the necessary receipt. But for doing this work the *hat* authority charged Rs. 2 per cow and Rs. 4 per buffalo as *lekhai kharach* (recording expenses).<sup>5</sup>

There was extensive antipathy among the peasants and also the traders against this disproportionate recording operating cost. The success of *no tola* movement in adjacent areas of Jalpaiguri district made the peasants and large sections of rural population attending the fair fidgety and they raised the demand for the decrease of charges for issuing receipts and recording sales and purchases in *Kalir Mela*. The Union Krishak Samiti Committees in Boda and Debiganj pushed the leadership for action to put a stop to the tyrannical practices at the *Kalir mela*.<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, the *Krishak Samiti* leaders of Jalpaiguri district decided to protest against the tyranny of *zamindars*. Volunteers were enrolled and a camp was organized on the bank of the Bhulli River. Pramada Chakrabarty, *Krishak Samiti* activist, was selected as the captain of the volunteer force. At this time, contact was made with the Dinajpur *Krishak Samiti* leaders. On the day fixed for action, hundreds of trained and well organized peasant volunteers led by Gurudas Roy, Madhab Datta and Pramada Chakrabarty crossed the river and marched to the *Kalir mela*. They carried with them red flags and *lathis*, spades and *bankua* or bamboo poles used to carry goods on the shoulder. Several hundred volunteers came to the *mela* place under the leadership of Dinajpur District *Krishak Samiti* too. Volunteers of *mela* raised the slogan: 'The charge for recording is to be reduced', 'Down with the oppression of the *mela* authority' etc.<sup>7</sup>

Peasants of all categories and dealers in cattle, many of whom were also peasants, supported the demand. But the authority of *Kalir mela* was not in a mood to grant the demand. Armed police force came from Thakurgaon in Dinajpur

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<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*, p. 184

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Das Gupta, Ranajit, *op. cit.*, p. 186

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.*, p. 31

district. Section 144 prohibiting assembly of five or more than five persons was promulgated. Wearing of *Samiti* uniforms, such as red shirts and red caps and blowing of whistles was banned.<sup>8</sup> But the *Krishak Samiti* leaders belonging to both the districts resorted to a form that had earlier been adopted in the case of Boda *hat*. In a bid to avoid direct and physical argument with the *hat* authority and police, they called upon the peasants and traders to boycott the *Kalir mela*. At the call of the *Krishak Samiti*, a *Dasher mela* or people's fair was set up at a place on the other side of the *Bhulli* river and within the Jalpaiguri district. *Krishak Samiti* activists began to write and issue receipts without any payment. As a result, the *Kalir mela* was at the risk of being discarded and the *mela* authority careful that this would involve a huge financial loss. Under the circumstances, the *zamindar's* men calmed down and settled to charge only Rs. 2 per cow/bullock and Rs. 4 per buffalo. The success with which about one thousand peasant volunteers and workers of Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur put to a stop in November 1939, the unjust exactions made by the *zamindar* in the *Kalir mela* led to the beginning of wide peasant movement in these two districts.<sup>9</sup> In this year, their committees and volunteers launched, with 900 volunteers, a very successful fight against the tax and save many thousand rupees of the poor peasant.<sup>10</sup>

After the success achieved in *Kalir mela* movement in November 1939, the *hat* agitation spread to those *hats* in which the toll collection was still being made. In an official report for the second half of December, 1939, it was stated that the agitation has affected *hats* which were leased from an estate belonging to the Maharaja of Cooch Bihar, and had succeeded in bringing about the shutting of three *hats* and their re-opening on new sites exclusive of tolls.<sup>11</sup>

#### Importance of the movement

The success of *no tola* movement in the Maidan Dighi *hat* inspired the peasants in Boda, Debiganj and Pachagarh *Thana* areas and the movement against random fascination and collection of toll spread to other *hats*. In many of the small *hats* in those areas the toll rate was reduced and in a number of small *hats* the toll collection came to a stop. The toll collection, however, remained in force in some of the big *hats* and this became an issue of disagreement. One of these, the Boda *hat* was owned and directly controlled by the powerful Cooch Bihar Raj Estate. Armed retainers and Cooch Bihar Raj officials were posted there. The *thana* too was located there. So it was not easy for the *Krishak Samiti* and the peasants to agitate against *tola* in Boda. There the movement took a novel form. At the call of the *Krishak Samiti*, the peasants boycotted the Boda *hat* and set up a *dasher hat* or a people's *hat* outside the area of the Raj Estate. Thus, *tola* collection came to a stop in the Boda *hat* too.<sup>12</sup>

The *ijaradar* of the Lakshimpur *hat* under Debiganj P.S. tried to arouse communal passion and thus divide the peasants. But the attempt was foiled by the unity of Hindu and Muslim peasants. *Tola* collection in Lakshmir *hat* too came to a standstill. This was followed by stoppage of *tola* collection in Pachagarh *hat*. It was one of the biggest *hats* in the area.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>11</sup>*Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 2 December 1939

<sup>12</sup> Bhattacharya, Ajitesh, *Madhuporni*, Jalpaiguri Zela Sanksha, Balurghat: 1987, p. 282

In response to these peasant agitations the District Board had to come forward. It fixed toll rates and directed the *ijaradars* of *hats* to collect toll according to the rates fixed by the Board.<sup>13</sup>

After independence of India, focus was shifted to land reforms to fulfill promises made during the freedom struggle. Land reforms were accorded highest significance as a tool of poverty alleviation to set up an egalitarian society in village in tune with the socialist ideology enshrined in the constitution's Directives Principles of state policy. The slogans- 'land to the tiller' and 'growth of justice' remained dear to millions of landless and marginal farmers. As a result of the limited success of the abolition of the *zamindari* system, the Planning Commission, in 1955, advised all the state governments to put a ceiling on agricultural land holding, to acquire land and distribute surplus land among the landless and other marginalized classes.

The movement first began in Jalpaiguri district and later on spread to Dinajpur and Rangpur.<sup>14</sup> The victory of *Kalir mela* and *hat tola* movements proved a particularly sensational event in these areas and established the credibility of *Kishan Sabha* among the peasants<sup>15</sup> In Jalpaiguri district, in terms of organization the impact of the *no tola* movement was such that many of the primary Congress Committees in the Debiganj *thana* area were merged into *Krishak Samiti* units.<sup>16</sup> In the Boda, Debiganj, Pachagarh and Sadar *thana* areas peasants, particularly the poor peasants and *adhiars*, began to actively enroll themselves as *Krishak Samiti* members. *Krishak Samiti* units were set up at 15 unions and more than 2000 members were enrolled.<sup>17</sup> *Hat tola* movement and the *Kalir mela* campaign in particular also exhibited strategic understanding, innovative ability and organizational ability of the *Krishak Samiti* leadership and peasant activists. Another aspect was that the movement, based on a broad peasant unity, badly hit the authority and economic power of the feudal or semi-feudal interests and their agents and also helped to reduce the fear in the minds of the peasants of the police and local bureaucracy.

Under pressure, the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act of 1953 was passed, annulling all intermediary interests. Another piece of legislation, the West Bengal Land Reforms Act 1955 was also passed to strengthen the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act of 1953 and to incorporate the 'West Bengal Bargadari Act' of 1950 within its purview.

The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act of 1953 brought all cultivators into direct relationship with the State. According to this Act and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, any person who cultivated his land himself, and or with the help of the members of his family, and or with the help of hired labourers under his own supervision and or by parcelling out the whole or part of his holding among the *bargadars/adhiars* or crop shares, was to be regarded as a cultivator. The cultivator needed to be a tiller himself.

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<sup>13</sup> Datta, Madhab, *Krishak Andoloner Gorar Kotha*, Jalpaiguri: 15 July 1972, p. 6

<sup>14</sup> *BPKS Conference Report*, p. 10

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Das Gupta, Ranajit, *op. cit.*, p. 188

<sup>17</sup> *Trisrota*, 25 March 1979

After the enactment of the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, a revisional survey and settlement operation was undertaken from the attestation stage to prepare a new record of rights. In preparing the record of rights of the revisional settlement operations, the Settlement Department, had been, from the very beginning of the operations, marking out the lands vested in the state. But it was not possible to calculate the exact total quantity of lands vested before August 1967.<sup>18</sup> A new intensive drive was launched for recovery of lands held in *benami* or through clandestine transfer and all other lands, vesting of which had been evaded so long.

## CONCLUSIONS

The *hat* movement was based on broad peasant unity and drew the support of even sections of *jotedars*, particularly the lower ones, and the middle strata of the rural population. The movement centered upon popular awareness of what has been just/unjust pressure. Immediately, this movement was followed by and partly overlapped with one that was based on the poor peasants, particularly the *adhiars*. The movement came to be known as the *adhiar* movement. It centered upon some aspects of relationship between the *jotedars* and *adhiars*. Beside with the *adhi bhag* or half share, the *jotedars* collected several *abwab* or additional levies which shared to intensify the oppression and exploitation of the *adhiars*. The later were compelled by the *jotedars* to part with large portions of their produce at various points of time throughout the year. It may be recalled that Milligan in his Settlement Report had implied at the burden of some fresh exactions on the *adhiars*. It seemed that over the years, particularly in the inter-war years, still more new levies were forced.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>18</sup>*Statement of Lands Vested under WBEA Act* (upto June 1969), Director of Land Records and Surveys, West Bengal, Calcutta, 1970, p. (i)