

NATURE OF THE LAND MOVEMENT IN JALPAIGURI DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Land movement of Jalpaiguri district has a rather long history. This movement was instances of left-led mass movements in Jalpaiguri district. Mass movements have always been an inseparable part of social progression and through organized protest and resistance against domination and injustice, they paved the way for new thoughts and actions that rejuvenated the process of change and transformation in society. A rigorous analysis of the issue, estimates of economic instability in agriculture and evidence on the location and intensity of peasant unrest is important for an understanding of the nature of political development in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. This work tried to focus and criticized the nature of Land Movement in the district.

KEYWORDS: *Peasant, Zotedar, Adhiar, Movement, Krishak Samiti*

INTRODUCTION

Land movement was a part of peasant unrest in Jalpaiguri district. This movement was originated against the exploitation of zamindars, zotedars, money landers, and the Britishers. Leftists and the leaders of the *Krishak Samiti* played an active role in this movement. They used a variety of techniques to reach the peasants. *Baithaks* or small group meetings, gatherings at *hats*, previously announced meetings at some public places and public demonstrations were held to approach the rural population. Leaflets containing pointed slogans were distributed. Leaflets were often printed on colored paper resembling cinema handbills used in *mofussil* towns and places in those days. *Dhols* (a local variant of drums) were used to announce meeting places or publicize information.¹ In carrying campaign and propaganda among the masses in those early days Congress Socialist Party and *Samiti* leaders tried to initiate the peasants to Left and radical politics. They spoke about the implications of the end of the British rule for the peasant masses. They taught them how the *zamindars* and certain other sections of rural vested interests served the British Raj. The leaders also told the masses what the *Samiti* aimed at and what its relation was with the Congress. They also explained what the red flag, the flag of the *samiti*, signified.

Links with Villagers and Conference of District Krishak Samiti

Krishak Samiti was formed under the leadership of middle-class city dwellers. But all the peasants were villagers and illiterate. So at the beginning, there was a communication gap between peasants and the *Krishak Samiti*. Their (leaders of *Krishak Samiti*) conception of the real condition of the peasants, nature of exploitation, classification of the peasant

¹ Das Gupta, Ranajit, *op. cit.*, p. 176

society was not initially comprehensive. But soon, they realized the need to communicate with the peasant for organizing the *Samiti*. Village and Union-level activists played an active role in organizing the *Krishak Samiti*. The activists, such as Anath Saran Goutam, an Arya Samajist small *jotedar* hailing from Balia in the United Provinces and also a quack doctor, Pramada Chakrabarty, a poor village priest and Congress worker, Mahinath Jha, a Brahman middle *jotedar*² from a UP district, Ashu Majumdar, Haripada Roy, a Rajbansi *jotedar*, and Upen Chanda, a cycle mechanic, provided the first link between the political leaders from an urban middle class origin and the peasantry and acted as percolators of radical ideas. It was noteworthy that many of them were active in the Congress for quite some time. Otherwise, most of these early *Krishak Samiti* activists were non-local people, persons who had come from outside the district, did not belong to peasant families and exercised considerable influence over the local society. Very soon, they joined local Hindu and Muslim activists coming from poor peasant families. Slowly, the *Krishak Samiti* began to spread its influence and build up its organization. The *babus* from Jalpaiguri town looked upon with some suspicion but soon won over the peasants through their tireless work and propagation of concrete issues and demands vitally affecting different sections of the rural population, particularly the poorer sections. Soon the *babus* came to be addressed as ‘comrades’ indicating a process of fraternization. Formation of Union-level *Krishak Samiti* and enrolment of members began in earnest.

A local *Krishak Samiti* Office was set up at Maidan Dighi in Boda. Nandaswer Barman donated four *bighas* (1.33 acre) of land for this purpose. He was a small peasant. At the end of May 1939, that is, within six months of the formation of the District Organizing *Krishak Samiti*, twelve Union *Krishak Samitis* were formed and the number of members enrolled exceeded 1,000.³ It was decided to hold the first regular conference of the District *Krishak Samiti* at Maidan Dighi in the last week of June and a Reception Committee was formed with Anath Saran Goutam as Chairman and Mahinath Jha as Secretary.⁴ Both were small *jotedars* of the district. Hectic preparations were made to ensure the success of the Conference. A membership drive was stepped up and a drive for the collection of money, rice, paddy, vegetables etc. was also launched. Sachin Das Gupta, Satish Lahiri, and Gurudas Roy published an appeal to the town people to make the Conference a success and Gurudas wrote an essay entitled *Krishak Sabha O Congress*.⁵ To explain the specific role of *Krishak Sabha* and its relation with the Congress he stated that the Congress was their national organization. As a constituent of the nation, each of the anti-imperialist classes was within it. But the *Krishak Sabha* was the class organization of the peasants. It was composed of only those peasant activists who supported the peasants and their separate class organization.

Issues and Demands of District *Krishak Samiti* Conference

The District *Krishak Sabha* Conference was held on 27 June 1939. A large number of peasants and *adhiars* and other sections of the rural population attended the Conference. Many progressive-minded people of the Jalpaiguri town came to the Conference. Dinesh Lahiri hoisted the red flag. He was a peasant and a Communist leader of Rangpur.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*, p. 177

⁴ *Trisrota*, 4 June 1939

⁵ *ibid.*, 18 June 1939

Abdullah Rasul, who was the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial *Kishan Sabha*, presided over the Conference. His presidential address was published in full in *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 29 June 1939. It was a very significant event in the history of the land movement in Jalpaiguri district. It was one of the earliest *Krishak Sabha* documents in Bengal, perhaps the earliest one, in which the *jotedars* were considered as a district component of the agrarian structure and the question of exploitation of *adhiars* by the *jotedars* was addressed.⁶ The peasants were either working as *adhiars* on land or tried to meet ends by working as agricultural laborers on a daily-wage basis. In north Bengal, in particular, this preponderance of *adhiars* was a very big problem within the peasant movement. Being placed in a helpless situation, the peasants got *Adhi* land for cultivation on condition of giving a high rate (share) of produced crops. They had no permanent right (*swatwa*) on land; they were bound to surrender the land to the *jotedars*. Again, when at the time of cultivation they took paddy loan, *dhan karja*, they got it on condition that at the time of repayment after four or five months they would have to pay an interest of at least a half *maund* (paddy) on a principal of one *maund*.⁷

In July and August of 1939, the activities of the *Krishak Samiti* were stepped up. Enrolment of *Krishak Samiti* members and volunteers was continued and meetings and demonstrations were frequently held around agrarian as well as broader political issues. At that time, the release of political prisoners was a major issue throughout Bengal. A 'Political Prisoners Release Committee' was formed in Jalpaiguri town under the leadership of Communists. Sachindra Nath was the Secretary of this organization. *Krishak Samiti* too took up the issue. A peasant meeting was held at Maidan Dighi to demand the release of political prisoners and also to protest against education cess on 15 July 1939.⁸ On 30 July 1939 a day-long *hartal* was observed in Boda in support of the release demand and in the afternoon of that day meetings were held and processions were brought out in different parts under Boda and Debiganj P.S.⁹ On 31 August at the initiative of Left Coordination Committee a well-attended meeting was held in Jalpaiguri town. Birendra Nath Dutta played an active role in the meeting. The All India Peasants Day was observed on 1 September. A number of peasants came from the rural areas and a big meeting was held on the Arya Natya Samaj ground in Jalpaiguri town. Satish Lahiri presided over the meeting. Among others, Sachin Das Gupta, Khagendra Nath Das Gupta, Charu Chandra Sanyal, Gurudas Roy, and Debendra Roy played an active role.¹⁰

Role of Women

Women participants played an active role in this movement. In this regard, the *Krishak Samiti* leaders made a special effort to organize rural women. At the initiative of Sulekha Roy and Usha Roy, a women's organization or 'Mahila Samiti', the first organization of the rural women in Jalpaiguri, was formed in Boda on 23 July 1939. On that day, a meeting and demonstration of about 200 women and girls were held.¹¹ On 30 July a women's procession led by Sulekha

⁶ *ibid.*, 18 June 1939

⁷ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 29 June 1939

⁸ Das Gupta, Ranajit, *op. cit.*, p. 179

⁹ *Trisrota*, 30 July 1939

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 13 August 1939

¹¹ *ibid.*, 3 September 1939

Roy, Sarojini Roy, and Usha Roy¹² was brought out to demand the release of political prisoners and later a women's meeting was held. Sulekha Roy and Pratima Devi explained the purpose behind the meeting. All the three women activists belonged to the family of Haripada Roy, a substantial landholder and cloth merchant of Boda.

However, the *Krishak Samiti* activity didn't for long remain confined to general propaganda and campaign. Very soon, the campaign took the shape of concrete struggles and actions around specific issues. The first issue around which the simmering agrarian discontent and anger of the oppressed and exploited peasants burst out was that of *hat tola* or *tolls* collected by those who owned or leased and controlled the *hats*.

New Aspect of the Movement

The active agitation against the random toll collection had provided great force to the peasant movement. During the harvesting season in late 1939 and early 1940, the movement had acquired a new dimension and a more militant outlook. 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 was just/unjust pressure. Immediately, this movement was followed by and partly overlapped with one that was based on poor peasants, particularly the *adhiars*. The movement came to be known as the *adhiar* movement. It centered upon some aspects of the relationship between the *jotedars* and *adhiars*. Besides with the *Adhi bhag* or half share, the *jotedars* collected several *abwabs* or additional levies which shared to intensify the oppression and exploitation of the *adhiars*. The later was 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.

Gola mochani was one of these types of collections. It meant expenses incurred for clearing the storehouse at the rate of half a *maund* of paddy for every *adhiar*. One more tax was *angina chancha* or operating cost on account of cleaning the threshing yard at the rate of half *maund* per *adhiar*. One more levy was *khamaru* or expense incurred for the maintenance of the person who helped to divide the crop at the rate of half a *maund* per every seven *maunds* of paddy. *Dhula khaoa* or expenses for spreading straw inside the bullock cart of the *jotedar* was another form of charge.¹³ *Barkandaji* or expenses for upholding of guards, *hari sabha* or expenses on account of religious of the meeting, *hati bandha*, and *ghora bandha* were some more forms of levies. It was possible to distinguish some other forms of similar levies. The picture that emerged from a review of the various exactions made by the *jotedars* suggested that the extortion was entirely arbitrary, unjust and highly unfair.

But the *adhiars* compulsion to the *jotedar* did not end with the payment of half share and all these exactions. The poor *adhiar* almost collectively had to take utilization loan of paddy and seed loan usually from his *giri* or *jotedar*. Such borrowings were made mainly under three systems, *derabari*, *dunno bari* and *dar kata*.

Under *dera bari* and *dunno bari*, the *bargadars* had repay the paddy borrowed at the rate of 50% or 100% interest

¹² *ibid.*, 30 July 1939

¹³ *BKS Conference Report*, Panjia, 1940, p. 10

for a loan incurred for a period of 5(five) or 6(six) months. Under the *dar kata* system, a certain quantity of paddy was lent during the lean season in terms of existing market price which was very high and the loan was calculated in terms of the money value of the paddy borrowed. Repayment had to be made after harvesting of the crop in the form of whatever amount of paddy was available at that amount of money. The price during repayment being low, the *bargadar* had to repay much more in terms of paddy than he had borrowed. Whatever might have been the particular system under which a *bargadar* borrowed, the result was further impoverishment. However, many *adhiars* remained thankful after paying to the *jotedar* his due half share.¹⁴

The normal practice was to stack the entire paddy after the harvesting was over in the *jotedar's kholan* or threshing place. This practice meant that the *adhiars* lacked any influence and were under the total grip of their *giris*. Under the circumstances, the place where the crop was divided was a significant issue.

All this had created a general bitterness in the minds of the *adhiars* who constituted a very large amount, according to a contemporary newspaper account, no less than seventy-five percent of the total population of Boda, Debiganj, and Pachagarh areas.¹⁵ The triumph of the *no tola* campaign moved them and provided a new self-assurance to them. The *Krishak Samiti* did not fail to measure the minds of the oppressed and exploited *adhiars* and during the harvesting season in the winter months of 1939-40 it put forward a number of demands like:

- Reduce interest rates on *karja dhan* or conjumption loan of paddy;
- No interest on seed loan;
- Put an end to all *abwab* or unjust and additional exaction and
- *Nij kholane dhan tola* or stack paddy in your own *kholan*.

CONCLUSIONS

Land movement was a social movement which was based around the idea of living a self-sufficient life close to nature. At the time of Indian Independence, Zamindaris and big landlords enjoyed lands. The people of Jalpaiguri district were tried to establish their right on land and agricultural crops. The motto *nij kholane dhan tola* was put forward to declare the *adhiars* right in the choice of the threshing place and protect their interests from the different unlawful exactions made by the *jotedars* and their hirelings. The position was such that once the crop was stacked in the *jotedar's kholan* the *jotedar* got unimpeded control over the crop. The people of the district, as well as India, tried to the establishment of 'Intermediaries' system. Under pressure, the 'Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee' was constituted under the Chairmanship of J.C. Kumarappa who recommended the establishment of 'Intermediaries' system. As a result, all forms of intermediaries including zamindars and similar forms are abolished. The peasants and the leaders of *District Krishak Samiti* tried to pressurize the zamindars and jotedars to transfer of ownership of land to tillers who personally held the land and is cultivating the same.

¹⁴ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 7 February 1940

¹⁵ *ibid.*

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