

ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND OF LAND MOVEMENT IN COLONIAL AND POST 1947 JALPAIGURI DISTRICT

Shyamal Chandra Sarkar

Research Scholar, P.D. Women's College, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

Land movement has a rather long history, and there is always a just cause for Indian peasants, laboring under difficult conditions— uncertain weather, the mendacity of moneylenders, oppressive taxation or revenue assessments, fluctuating prices of crops, poor or negligible government subsidies, and the support of large families, among many others— to join a rebellion or to instigate one. Economic instability in Jalpaiguri district agriculture was a primary cause of agrarian discontent during the twentieth century. Land movement was a part of the agrarian unrest in the district. A rigorous analysis of the issue, estimates of economic instability in agriculture and evidence on the location and intensity of agrarian unrest in colonial and post 1947 Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal is important for an understanding of the nature of political development in this district.

KEYWORDS: *Land, Peasant, Zamindar, Jotedar, Taxations, Exploitations, Movement*

INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth and twentieth century was a period of agrarian unrest in the Jalpaiguri district. In this period, farmers' protests led to the formation of organized movements against oppressors. Farmers cited the reasons for their unhappiness as declining prices, decreasing purchasing power, monopolistic practices of moneylenders, and other middlemen. Economic instability in Jalpaiguri district agriculture was a primary cause of agrarian discontent during the twentieth century. Land movements were 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.

Origin and Back Ground of Land Movement

The back-to-the-land movement called for occupants of real property to grow food on the land on a small-scale basis for themselves or for others, and to perhaps live on the land while doing so. The concept was popularized in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century by activist Bolton Hall, who set up vacant-lot farming in New York City and wrote extensively on the subject. The practice, however, was strong in Europe even before that time. It also attempts to find a third way between capitalism and socialism¹ It was later used to refer to a North American social

¹ Letter, Joseph Nuttgens, *London Review of Books*, 13 May 2010, p. 4

phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s. This latter back-to-the-land movement was a migration from cities to rural areas that took place in the United States, its greatest vigor being before the mid-1970s.

Lord Cornwallis changed the land administration system of Bengal by delegating the tax collection powers to the District Collectors. The Permanent Settlement of land revenue was introduced in 1793 that treated *zamindars* as land-owners and hence they were required to pay 9/10th of revenue to the government. Smaller *zamindars* were considered as *talukdars* and performed as subordinates to the sub-collectors. The new system of *zamindars-talukdars* received a mixed response. Further, there was a hike in the tax rate. Partition of joint families further fragmented the land into smaller pieces. Absentee landlordism came into existence. The defaulting *zamindars* used to be imprisoned. They acted as middlemen between the Government and the tiller. Soon, the tillers were often reduced to agricultural *laborers*. The personal link between *zamindars* and tillers vanished. Despite this defect, the *zamindari* system was extended to Benaras and Orissa and later to the Northern Sarkars.

Permanent Settlement was concluded by the Cornwallis administration in 1793. It was a contract between the East India Company's government and the Bengal landholders. Under the contract, the landholders or *zamindars* were admitted into the colonial state system as the absolute proprietors of landed property. Besides being turned into proprietors of land, the *zamindars* were endowed with the privilege of holding their proprietary right at a rate which was to continue unchanged forever. Under the contract, the government was barred from enhancing its revenue demand on the *zamindars*. A permanent settlement with *zamindars* had some immediate objectives in view. These may be classified as placing revenue paying on a definite footing and making revenue collection sure and certain; ensuring a minimum revenue; relieving officials of revenue matter and engaging them to other spheres of administration; and finally, forging an alliance between the *zamindar* class and the colonial rulers.

Though not entirely, the government succeeded in achieving these short-term goals. The revenue-paying agency was put on a definite footing in the person of the *zamindar*. The government now knew how much was to be its annual inflow from land and the *zamindars* also knew for certain their contractual obligation to the government. Formerly, neither the government nor the revenue payers knew exactly where they stood as regards revenue collection and payment.

Very soon, the wave of Permanent Settlement reached Jalpaiguri district. The agent, who was the tax collector of British East India Company, became *zamindar* (landowner) within a very short time. A new relationship was created between peasants and *zamindars* after 1793. The peasants cultivated the land but they were not owners of the land. On the other hand, *zamindars* were the owners of the land though they did not cultivate the land. A relation between peasants and *zamindars* deteriorated in Jalpaiguri district. During the year 1838, the British government decided that it would extract 2/3 of the economic rental value of the land with the help of settlement officials. As a result, the land proprietors were ready to give land on rent to the non-proprietors at the same rate of the revenue that they paid the government officials. Moreover, the condition was such that the major portion of the land was transferred to the moneyed class who came to be known as *Mahajans*. On the other hand, the ordinary landlords found it difficult to match the demands of the British and consequently, they had to carry forward their interest payments till the next harvest which escalated in leaps and bounds with passing time. During British rule, the condition of farmers was such that they experienced an alienation from their land and the source of their alienation was the emergence of a new class known by the name moneylenders. Interference of money lenders made the region agriculturally backward. As a result, a large number of the peasants became wage farmers.

On the other hand, the *zamindars* and moneylenders became rich.

India was an agrarian country where seventy per cent of its population depends on agriculture. The peasants were differentiated in terms of their relationship with the ownership of lands such as supervisory agriculturists, owners-cultivators, sharecroppers, tenants and landless laborers who are known as *kishans*. In 1873, the agrarian movement began in the East Bengal. The *zamindars* of Bengal were notorious for they began to exploit and humiliate the farmers by confiscating their property illegally. The farmers united themselves into societies. They demanded the abolition of land tax and began to attack the *zamindars* and their agents. The government intervened and suppressed the movement by taking stringent measures. As a result of the movement, the Bengal Tenancy Act was framed in 1885. This Act provided an opportunity for some categories of farmers to become permanent tenants of the land.²

The economy of the Jalpaiguri district was mainly based on agriculture. But the agricultural production was very low. The first settlement of land in Western Dooars took effect since April 1871 and was made after a detailed measurement and classification of all cultivated land. The government took all lands in *Kha's* possession and settled them with *jotedars*. The *jotedars* were permitted to retain in their holdings as much wasteland as they chose. They in fact, appropriated 1, 42, 127 acres of wasteland against 80,395 acres of cultivated land.³ Apart from the interest of *jotedars*, no other interest on land was recognized. In this settlement, it was decided that the *jotedar* had a vested and transferable interest in the holding. The total revenue demand stood at Rs. 88,618 at the end of the settlement. The second settlement of lands in western Dooars took effect since April 1880. In this settlement, the rights of *chukanidars* that is tenants under the *jotedars* were given some recognition. Government desired that the aggregate of rent paid by *chukanidars* to a *jotedar* should not exceed the revenue payable by the *jotedar* by more than 50% and that the rent payable by the *chukanidars* should be fixed for the period of settlement. The general result of the settlement was to raise the revenue from Rs. 88,618 to Rs. 1,51,862. The third settlement and survey operations were carried out between 1889 and 1895. In this settlement, the lands in Alipur Duars Subdivision were seen as parceled into 11,112 *jotes* or blocks held by the Government in *khas*. Of these, 9,971, comprising an area of 3,84,895.91 acres, were assessed for revenue.⁴ One *jote* was settled with the descendants of Upendranath Duardar as revenue-free *jote*, comprising an area of 36.6 acres. According to the settlement of 1889-95, the revenue demand of Alipur Duars Subdivision stood at Rs. 3,74,901. This was a substantial increase and was due partly to the increase in the number of revenue-paying *jotes* brought under cultivation.⁵

Jotedars of permanently settled areas of Jalpaiguri district were first-degree *pattanidars* who elsewhere in Bengal were known as *talukdaras*. Under the provisions of the Bengal Tenancy Act, they became *raiyyats* who couldn't be evicted

² Krishna Reddy, K., *Bharatha Desa Charitra Adhunika Yugam*, Hyderabad: 1994, p. 249

² *West Bengal District Gazetteers.*, Jalpaiguri, 1981, p. 204

² *ibid.*, p. 205

at will. The *jotedars* in both the permanently settled estates and in the Government *Khas Mahals* in Alipur Duars Sub-division used to give most of their land as *pattani* to *choukidars* or *mulandars*. At first, *choukidar* was not allowed under the provisions of the *jotedars*, lease to sub-let the whole or any portion of his tenure in further *pattani* though he was allowed to employ *adhiars* or sharecroppers. At the base of the ladder were the *adhiars*. They cultivated land immediately under a *jotedar*, but whatever the designation or status of the *adhiars* immediately superior might be, he was known as the *adhiars giri*. Half the produce of the land went to the *giri* and half to the *adhiar*. The *giri* usually made in advance of seed or cash to the *adhiar* which was adjusted when the produce was divided. The ploughs and cattle sometimes belonged to the *giri* and sometimes to the *adhiar*. The legal status of the various classes of *adhiar* was somewhat uncertain till the Board of Revenue passed orders that *adhiars*, who were independent of their *giris* in the matters of plough and cattle were to be treated as tenants, irrespective of the length of time during which they had occupied the lands they cultivated.

During the settlement and survey operations of 1889 – 95, an attempt was made to group the settled agriculturists among the Meches and Garos together, and give them a separate colony, for they were being exploited by their more intelligent neighbors and were in danger of losing their land. A Mech and Garo Colony were established in Alipur *tehsil*, east of the Torsa River and south of the road leading to Rajabhatkhawa. 766 *jotes* covering an area of 90,593.66 acres or 30 sq. miles was set apart for the colony.⁶ But not all members of the two communities were settled because a majority was not settled, agriculturists. No special measures were taken to ensure that the tract of the country was kept reserved only for Mechs and Garros. Ordinary leases were issued and there was nothing to prevent the *jotedars* from transferring their holding. A special inquiry was made in 1907–08 and it was then found that there was not a single Garo in the colony and more than half of the *jotedars* were outsiders, mainly Oraons. They had initially been drafted from Bihar as laborers in tea gardens. After they had made some cash savings, many of them purchased *jotedari* rights and settled down. In 766 *jotes*, there were only 218 Mech *jotedars*, 177 Mech *chukanidars*, and 219 Meches *adhiars*.⁷

Relation between Landlords and Ryots

Relations between the landlords and *ryots*, recognized as tenants by the Bengal Tenancy Act, were initially cordial and more or less free from tension and strife. Strained relations between *jotedars* and *chukanidars* on the one hand, and *adhiars* on the other developed due to non-legal and semi-customary exactions the former made upon the latter. The situation was particularly bad in the estate of the descendants of Col. Hedayet Ali.⁸ There were many shares and co-sharers on that estate. The share of each had dwindled down to very low levels and so to replenish their funds all the sharers were in the habit of making exorbitant exactions from the *adhiars*. The effect of these exactions was the *Tebhaga* Movement of 1946-50, which led to the enactment of West Bengal *Bargadars* Act of 1950 for the amelioration of the condition of the crop-sharing tillers. The *Tebhaga* Movement spread to Jalpaiguri from the neighboring district of Rangpur and Dinajpur.⁹

⁶ *ibid.*, 1981, p. 205

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 210

the Dooars region was the *Khasmahal* area. Here, the measurement of land was to be ascertained with *Hal* (15 X 0.33 acre approx) not *Bigha* (0.33 acre approx). Per *jotedar* of the area was the owner of 200 – 1000 *Hal* land. At this time, their lifestyle was highly aristocratic. Generally, their children's were not keen on service. They preferred to collect the tax from the peasants. There were so many *jotedars* in this district.

Table 1: List of the Jotedars in Various Parts of Jalpaiguri District

Sl.No.	Name	Area
1.	Mati Lal Roy	Debiganj P.S.
2.	Madan Singh Barua	Kumar Gram P.S.
3.	Lalit Mohan Roy	Daukimari of Dhupguri P.S.
4.	Raja Mohan Roy	North Thakurpath of Dhupguri P.S.
5.	Abdul Karim	Bakali of Maynaguri P.S.
6.	Abdul Goni Mian	Bakali of Maynaguri P.S.
7.	Dhananjoy Roy, Md. Sone Ali.	Bhote Patti of Maynaguri P.S.
8.	Madang Sing Barua	Kumargram P.S.
9.	Mahendra Nath Roy	Narar Thali
10.	Satish Chandra Roy	Bhatibari of Alipur Duar P.S.
11.	Bihiram Mandal (Oraon)	Banchukamari
12.	Sashi Mohan Roy	Salkumar of Falakata P.S
13.	Maniram Karji	Salkumar area
14.	Bolichand Deb Karji	Madari Hat P.S.
15.	Khidir Baksh	Sishubari Hat
16.	Mangal Das Bhagat	Sishu Bari
17.	Debendra Nath Brahma	Kalchini P.S.
18.	Mahesh Gabur, S.C. Mondal	Satali
19.	Hiralal Singha	Bhutnirghat of Falakata P.S.
20.	Mechua Mahammad	Dhaniram Pur
21.	Bhalendra Barua	Chana Tipa of Dhupguri P.S.
22.	Chandra Kanta Roy	Duramari of Dhupguri P.S.
23.	Gaya Nath Das	Chalsa of Meteli P.S.
24.	Kala Saheb, Apataruddin	Batabari
25.	Aminar Mian	Hay Hay Pathar
26.	Birendra Nath Katham	Kathambari of Mal P.S.
27.	Kousar Alam	Dhoulabari
28.	Giban Singha Roy	Sariam of Rajganj P.S
29.	Lachhiram Mohanmta, Brijmohan Roy, Parbamohan Roy, Jharusing Roy	Ambari Falakata
30.	Chandra Mohan	Singimari of Maynaguri P.S.
31.	Rammohan Babu	Anguri of Maynaguri P.S.
32.	Race of Basunia Family	Anguri of Maynaguri P.S.
33.	Mothura Mohan Barman	Putimari of Maynaguri P.S.
34.	Kalua Mohan Roy, Girish Ch. Roy	Saptibari of Maynaguri P.S.
35.	Brajendra Nath Roy,	Charer Bari of Maynaguri P.S.
36.	Surendra Nath Roy	Saptibari of Maynaguri P.S.
37.	Ram Kanta Roy	Tekatuli of Maynaguri P.S.
38.	Panchanan Mallick	Mallick Bari of Bhangar hat
39.	Jamiruddin Ahamed	Anguri of Maynaguri P.S.

Source: Kar, Arabinda, *Kirat Bhumi*, Second Edition, Jalpaiguri Zela Sankalan, Sanskriti Para, Jalpaiguri, Date not mentioned

The Problem of Adhiar and Preparation for Movement

The largest part of the village of Jalpaiguri district was *adhiari* land. The *adhiar* (sharecropper) cultivated the land of *jotedars*. They got 50% of produced crops. But it was not sufficient for the *adhiars* to maintain their families. So they were bound to borrow the crops at high interest from the *jotedars* or the moneylenders. Sometimes, the entire produce of



Figure 2: Md. Mokbul Hossain, Own Photograph on 11 May 2011

Adhiars were spent on loans repayment. At the same time, they would borrow the crops with the same interest. As a result, the *zamindar*, *jotedars*, and moneylenders became very rich. On the other side, the peasant became very poor. In addition to this, there was inferior tax or *Abwab*. *Golamochhani* was the example of the domination. The peasants kept their paddy in the storeroom of *jotedars*. They had to pay a portion of crops for the protection of the crops. *Jotedars* also collected a portion of the crops from the peasants for maintaining the retainers who were under control of *jotedars*. Moreover sixteen types of *abwab* were collected by the *jotedars* from the peasants though there was no law regarding this. In this way, they were exploited by the *jotedars* and gradually impoverished. In these circumstances, the Krishak Samiti decided to protest against the exploiters. They tried to organize the peasants of the district.

The peasant movement was led by left political parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and the Socialist Party (SP) through their kishan organizations. The *Krishak Sabha* was aware of the problems of peasants till the *Tebhaga* Movement of 1946-47.¹³ At the same time, tea garden workers were also exploited by the planters and their followers. They did not hesitate to help the peasants.¹⁴ A conference of District *Krishak Samiti* was held on 27 June 1946 at Jalpaiguri. The *Samiti* adopted resolutions in the Conference relating to problems of the peasant.¹⁵ The resolution was significant. A clearly formulated list of demands relating to the problems of *adhiars* in terms of the movement was raised at the district and provincial level of Bengal Provincial *Krishak Sabha*. The eight resolutions passed at the Conference demanded:

- Abolition of the *zamindari* system without payment of any compensation,
- Modification and amendment of the ‘mahajani’ Bill in the interest of the peasants,

¹³ *West Bengal District Gazetteers*, Jalpaiguri, 1981, p. 210

¹³ *ibid.*

- Provision of rent-free grazing land,
- Free compulsory primary education without any tax,
- Payment of salary to the Union Board out of government funds and spending of money collected as 'chaukidari' tax on rural development,
- Introduction of Tenancy Act in 'khas mahal' area,
- Right to collect of firewood etc. and grazing of domestic cattle in the forest areas and
- A release of all political prisoners.

In one resolution, it protested against the Federation Plan and efforts to intensify imperialist exploitation and called upon all the anti-imperialist forces to prepare for launching a struggle. From the Conference, an Executive Committee was selected with Kabiraj Satish Chandra Lahiri, a veteran Congress leader, Jogesh Dutta who had cordial relations with a revolutionary group of Jalpaiguri and Dr Abanidhar Guha Neogy, a member of the Presidium, Gurudas Roy as Secretary, Sachin Das Gupta and Sachin Dutta as two Assistant Secretaries and Chunilal Bose as Office Secretary. Madhab Datta was elected as one of the members of the Executive Committee.¹⁶ Among other members were Pramada Chakrabarty, Mahinath Jha, Dolgobinda Barman, Sirajuddin Sarkar, Machhiruddin Sarkar, Sasanka Bose, a Jalpaiguri town-based young doctor, Parimal Mitra, Secretary of the District Students Association, Sudhin Moitra, a medical student and a few others. The conference also elected a fifteen-member Sub-divisional Committee with Chakrabarty as President and Jha as Secretary.

In the subsequent months, the propaganda of Provincial Conference included a persistent and tolerant descriptive campaign approximately on issues of peasant grievances and against exploitation and domination on the peasantry and *adhians* in particular, became a regular feature of activities of the Krishak Samiti. These activities were carried on mainly in three police station areas— Boda, Debiganj, and Pachagarh. In view of this background, these areas already had a body of rural political activists. Gurudas Roy, Sachin Das Gupta, and Madhab Datta were the three most important political figures in these activities. They used to lead a simple and austere life. They lived among the rural masses, particularly the poorer sections of them. They did not hesitate to stay in the peasant hovels and shared their meager food and many of the hardships of their life. All this helped to create a new sense of credibility about them in the minds of the rural people.

Along with the effort to organize the peasants and the rural population, the *Krishak Samiti* tried to reach wider sections of popular masses, particularly the urban middle classes, and get from them political as well as material support. With that aim in mind, it regularly published notices of meetings, circulars, resolution, reports on conditions in rural areas

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Kar, Arabinda, *Kirat Bhumi*, Jalpaiguri zela Sankalon, Second Edition, Sanskriti Para, Jalpaiguri, date not mentioned

¹⁶ Md. Mokbul Hossain, resident of Bhote Patti (Khattimari) of Jalpaiguri district, was the *bargadar* of Md. Sone Ali, *jotedar* of Bhotepati (Khottimari) of Jalpaiguri district.

¹⁶ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 29 June 1939

and *Krishak Samiti* activity in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. For example, *Trisrota* of 2 April 1939, published the following news item sent by Sasanka Sekhar Bose, an office bearer of the *Krishak Sangathani Samiti*- 'Under the initiative of local *Krishak Sangathani Samiti* many meetings have been held in various unions of the Sadar Subdivision and already numbers of nine Union *Krishak Samiti* have been formed.' The illegal exactions *abwab*, *tohuri*, etc. were extensively collected from the peasants of Jalpaiguri district. In this year, the conditions of the peasant were very bad. They were bound to sell the jute and paddy very low price. As a result the exploited people were tried to protest against the exploitures.

CONCLUSIONS

The leaders of the *Krishak Samiti* used a variety of techniques to reach the people. *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.¹⁷ 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.

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6. *ibid.*, p. 210
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¹⁷ Das Gupta, Ranajit, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869-1947*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, Bombay Calcutta Madras, 1992, p. 180

¹⁷ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 2 July 1939

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 16 July 1939

¹⁷ Das Gupta, Ranajit, *op. cit.*, p. 176

8. *Colonel Hedayet Ali was the military commander of Alipurduar. After the second Anglo-Bhutan War in 1865, according to the Treaty of Sinchula, the Eleven Bengal Dooars were annexed by the British Government, although the Seven Assam Dooars had already been occupied by the British in 1942; and subsequently Colonel Hedayet Ali was posted as the commander at the military settlement on the bank of the River Kaljani. The entire tract of land of the Buxa Dooar was leased out to Hedayet Ali on his superannuation and the growing town adjacent to the military settlement began to grow as well. The history of Alipurduar (named after Hedayet Ali) can be reconstructed from the writings of J. F. Grunning, J. A. Milligan, D.H.E Sunder and Sailen Debnath.*
9. *West Bengal District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri, 1981, p. 210*
10. *ibid.*
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