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19th Century's Peasant Movements of Assam: It's Impact and Importance

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Abstract

Peasant discontent against the British rule was a familiar feature of India in the 19th century. The British rule had adversely affected the economic life of the people of Assam. The enhancement of land revenue and imposition of new taxes made the lives of the peasants unhappy. The revolt of 1857 inspired the riots to revolt against the colonial power. In the later part of the 19th century the peasants of Assam irrespective of caste, class and creed realised the exploitation of British rule. The poor peasants, they demanded the reduction of land revenue and abolition of other taxes. The opium policy of the British government was also responsible for the occurrence of the peasant movements in Assam. The peasant movements has a far reaching impact on political, social and economic point of view.

Keywords: Land revenue, economic exploitation, peasants, national consciousness.

Introduction: With the advent of the British, the socio-economic and political condition of India had taken a new turn. They began to run the administration of the country in order to suit their colonial motives. An important impact of British rule on rural India was the changes in the agrarian structure. Since the grant of Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765, the major concern of the East India Company's administration was to collect as much revenue as possible. In the late 18th and early 19th century the revenue reforms of the company's government had fundamentally affected and altered the Indian rural society. In this period high revenue demands and imposition of new taxes had so severely affected the entire rural population that all sections of the peasantry in different parts of the country participated in a series of violent protest. It is observed that in the vast Zamindari areas the peasants were left to the tender mercies of the Zamindars who rack-rented them and compelled them to pay the illegal dues and performed beggar. In ryotwari areas, the government itself levied heavy land revenue. So they were compelled to borrow money from the moneylenders. Over large areas, the lands, crops and cattle of the peasants passed into the hands of the moneylenders, landlords and rich peasants. Some major peasant uprisings which rocked the country were such as indigo revolt of 1859-60 in Bengal, revolt

of Poona and Ahmadnagar districts of Maharashtra, Mappila outbreak in Malabar, Ramosi peasant force in Maharashtra in 1879, the Kuka revolt in Punjab etc.

In Assam also a series of agrarian movements were launched by the peasants to redress their grievances. They expressed their dissatisfaction through *raijmels* or people's assembly. Both the Hindus and the Muslims united under the *Gossains*, *Doloi's* and village headman of their respective areas to protest against the unjustified revenue assessment of the British government. These peasant movements had a great contribution towards the growth of national consciousness in Assam in the 19th century.

Objectives of the Paper: In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss how far the peasant movements in the 19th century were successful in bringing political accurateness among the masses of Assam. To make a comparative study of the features of the peasant uprisings of Assam and other parts of India in the 19th century is also another objective of the present work. It also examines the peasant movements of Assam in the above mentioned period.

Methodology: For the work mainly secondary source materials have been consulted to achieve in the objectives.

The British rule brought a significant changes to the medieval Assamese society. When the British took over the charge of the province it was in a largely depopulated and impoverished. Income derived in Assam was not enough to meet the administrative expenditure. The financial difficulties forced the British government to impose different agricultural taxes which were very much oppressive for the peasants. Lands were classified into three categories, *Basti*, *Rupit* and *Faringati*. The *rupit* lands in Kamrup district in 1835 were assessed at one rupee per *pura*, the *baotali* at 12 *annas* and *faringati* at four *annas*. These rates differed slightly in other districts and were gradually raised¹

The peasants of Assam irrespective of caste, class and creed realised the exploitation of British colonial rule. The poor peasants demanded the reduction of land revenue and imposition of new taxes. Another important factor which brought grievances to the people was the transfer of power from the British East India Company to the crown. In order to fulfil the huge deficit caused by the revolt the Britishers searched for new sources of revenue² So, the government imposed some new taxes. In 1858 stamp duties were introduced. In 1860 income tax was imposed which were totally unfamiliar to the people of Assam. Exise duties were leived at the Sadar Stations of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. Washing of gold was also farmed out and the rights to fish in rivers and beels was offered to the highest bidder. Cutting of timber and reeds and use of grazing fields were also made taxable³

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, one of the leading members of rising middle class in Assam in his memorandum to A. J. Mofat Mills "Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam narrates that 'a *poorah* of high *rupit* land yielding 20 or 15 *maunds* of rice valued at from two or three Rs in looded with a tax of one rupee and four *annas*'⁴ The

riyots were further impoverished by the assessment of forest lands producing *Som* tree in which *Muga* worms were brought under taxation. Under the settlement rules of 1870, *rupit* and *basti* lands were settled for a period of ten years at fixed rate. The settled area in the Brahmaputra valley gradually increased by 15% between 1881-82 and 1891-1892⁵

Between 1826 and 1853 that the land revenue rates were enhanced on several occasions. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan observed that assessment on some of the *rupit* lands, he said was found to be nearly equal in value to one half of their gross produce⁶ The total land revenue demand more than quadrupled between 1856-1866 and 1897-98, while the growth of cultivated acreage under all crops except tea remained as low as a little over 7%. Tax enhancement in 1893 was particularly objectionable in view of the black fever epidemic that had been depopulating the Assamese villages since 1888⁷

It was not the land revenue policy which was exploitative, the opium policy of the British government was equally destructive. In 1860, the local cultivation of opium was prohibited, but not its trade. At first opium was used as drug and was prevalent among a few respective Assamese not by the common people. During the last days of the Ahom's rule the opium had become popular intoxicated drug. Robinson and Mill observed that about three fourths of the people of Assam to be opium addicts in the middle of the 19th century⁸ In spite of high price of government opium, the number of consumers had increased gradually. In Sibsagar district as for example, opium was sold in market at Rs. 15 to Rs. 20 per seer and the consumption rose from 52 *maunds* in 1852-53 to 87 *maunds* in 1858-59⁹. On the other hand, lack of government steps towards the development of agriculture neglect of embankments, bunds and means of communication also severely affected the agricultural based rural economy¹⁰

The Jayantia rebellion: The first popular rising against the new taxation measures took place in the Jayantia Hills. Mr. Allen, the Member of the Board of Revenue, who made a visit to the Khasi and Jayantia Hills argued that the Syntengs should be required to contribute something to the general revenue in acknowledgement of the supremacy of the British government. His advice was followed and in 1860 a house tax was imposed on them. 310 persons, including all leaders of the people were assessed with an aggregate tax of Rs. 1259 to levy the new income tax. In the first year it was paid without any strong opposition¹¹ The introduction of the license tax in January 1862 and attempts at confiscation of even ceremonial weapons by a police force made them angry. It resulted a more serious outburst of revolt in the same month in 1862. The police station at Jowai was burnt to the ground. To suppress the revolt, regiments of Sikhs and an elephant battery were employed. But the Syntengs with their weapons like bows and arrows fought bravely for their independence¹². But the British government decided to retain the house tax and steps had been undertaken to alien the Syntengs with the British rule. Some measures were also undertaken to develop their social condition. The British government gave them rights to elect their Dolois and construct panchayat for the trial of civil and criminal case¹³

Phulaguri Uprising: The opium policy of the British government became very miserable for the people of Nowgong district, which occupied the highest position in poppy cultivation in Assam. In the meantime a rumour was spread that soon government imposed tax on cultivation of *tamul* (areca-nut) and *pan* (betelvine) would also be made taxable. The peasants of Phulaguri, mostly the Lalungs about 12 k.m. away from Nowgong town led a revolt in 1861. About 15000 people marched to the Sadar Court of Nowgong to protest against the ban on poppy cultivation and contemplated imposition of tax on *tamul* and *pan*. But Lt Herbert Sconce refused to hear their complains. Then the dissatisfied peasants held a *raijmels* for five days from October 15 to discuss about their future plan to redress their grievances. The number of people attending the *raijmel* increased day by day¹⁴ The police force tried to break up the gatherings but failed. On 18th October, Lt Singer, the Assistant Commissioner of Nowgong arrived at Phulaguri with a force. The people said that if he would respond their demand then they were now ready to give complaints to the higher authorities. Then angry Singer ordered to seize their bamboo lathis. He was beaten to death by the angry mob and his dead body was thrown into river *Kolong*. An armed force arrived in the disturbed area and began to fire to the gatherings. Several persons lost their lives and many were injured. This spontaneous uprising is known as 'Phulaguri Dhawa'¹⁵. Some British officials regarded it as 'Opium eaters' revolt¹⁶

The Assam Riots: (1893-94): Phulaguri uprising also could not stop the government policy of enhancement of land revenue nor the supply of government opium. In 1868-69 the government had increased the rate of land revenue on rupit and non-rupit lands in the Assam valley districts from 15 to 50%. A cadastal survey, ordered meanwhile, was completed during the years 1882-93. While the land revenue demand increased substantially because of new additions to the settled area and the detection of concealed cultivation¹⁷. The conditions of peasantry worsened very much in the period 1891-1901 due to a further rise in opium rates, the devastating earthquake of 1897, which caused the deaths of more than 1500 people added to their miseries¹⁸. The people particularly in the districts of Darrang, Kamrup, Nowgong protested against this step of British government through *raijmels*. A series of poestest broke out known as Assam Riots beginning with December, 1893. At that time, Sir William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam made a new assessment and increased land revenue¹⁹. The revised rates in the Brahmaputra Valley initially involvement on enhancement of 53% on average, but in many villages it was as high as 70 to 100%²⁰.

The people in Kamrup and Central Assam spontaneously organized themselves under the *raijmels* to decide upon a no-tax campaign. On 24 December, 1893, Rangia bazaar was looted by a crowd of 200 to 250 people mostly Kacharies. Everywhere the *mels* directed the people not to pay the enhanced rates. On 30 December, 3000 people demonstrated against the unpopular steps of the British government. On 6th January, 1894, the district Magistrate Ma Cabe arrived in Rangia with an additional police force. On 8th January, he was able to arrest 15 persons. On 10th January, the people marched towards the Rangia thana to protest against the enhancement of land revenue, postponement of the collection of land revenue and release of their detained comrades. When 2000 and 3000 lathi armed people began to

close the thana, he ordered a firing. According to a report published in 'Hindoo Patriot' of 5th February, 1894 there was no loss of life²¹. The government found it difficult to collect revenue in the tahsils of Patidarang, Nalbari, Barama and Bajali and in the mauzas of Upar Barbhog and Sarukhetri. At Lachima in Sarukhetri Mauza of the Kamrup district on 29th January, 1894, mouzadar and mandal were severely assaulted by the people when they were going to collect revenue from the villages. The mouzadar died a few days after the incident. 75 persons were arrested related with the incident²². But about 3000 strong assembly released the arrested persons.

Patharughat Uprising: The most severest and tragic peasant movements in the 19th century was the Patharughat peasant uprising of Mangaldai Subdivision on 28th January, 1894. Through the *raijmels* they protested against the increased rate of land revenue and adopted a no tax campaign. In that circumstances J. D. Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang arrived with a military force under Lt. Berrington. About 2000 riots gathered in front of the camp of Anderson and protested against the increased rate of land revenue. The angry mob began to throw sticks and clods of earth to Anderson. Berrington ordered an open fire at last and as a result, 15 persons injured according to government report. But according to non-government report 140 persons lost their lives and 150 person injured²³. The Patharughat tragedy was regarded as the "Jaliwanwalabagh Massacre" of Assam.

Findings: It is seen that the peasant uprisings were the reflection of peasant discontentment in Assam. It also showed the nature and objectives of the British rule in Assam. They stood against the exploitation and extortions of the British government. Though contemporary British administrators regarded these movements as the evil result of the *raij-mels* but it was not true. Through these *raij-mels* they expressed their miserable economic condition under the British rule. The *raijmels* became their platform through which they could express their grievances. There were certain features of the peasant uprisings in the 19th century. Like the peasant movements of other parts of India, in Assam also the peasants emerged as the main force in the agrarian movements. They were bounded by some particular objectives and redressal to some particular grievances. Their object did not deal with the end of colonialism, exploitation and subordination²⁴

Another important feature of the uprisings was that their territorial limitations. In Assam also it is seen that the peasant movements were limited to a particular community or a particular region. It was most effective within the geographical area in which that community lived or work²⁵. Peasants identified themselves more with their cultural groups rather than with the economic category of class²⁶. They also lacked continuity of struggle or long term organisations. When the specific objectives of a movement were achieved, its organisation dissolved and disappeared. So they had failed to threaten the British Supremacy²⁷. The peasant uprisings were spontaneous in nature. Sometimes it is seen that a peaceful gatherings immediately took a violent way without any proper plans and programmes.

The peasant movements showed the strong sense of legitimacy of what was justifiable. They did not deny the state's right to collect tax on land but objected when the level of taxation crossed all traditional demands. The Indian peasants showed their bravery and a spirit of sacrifices and remarkable organizational ability²⁸. The British government was compelled to withdraw some illegal measures imposed on them. In 1894 on 29th March, the issue was raised at the Imperial Legislative Council by Rash Behari Ghosh and he vehemently criticised the revenue policy of the British government in Assam and as a result, the British government reduced the land revenue in Assam to 32.7%²⁹. The authorities also limited such enhancement for an individual holding upto a maximum of about 50% of the previous rental. This was no doubt a partial victory for the people³⁰.

The 19th century peasant movement did not possess a new ideology and a new social, political and economic programmes. They failed in forming a strategy for struggle that would unify and mobilize the peasants and other sections of the society for nation wide political activity. In the absence of such conception, ideology, programme, leadership and strategy of struggle it was easy for the colonial rule to suppress the uprisings with force. But it is true that these movements helped to organise powerful struggles around their class demands and to create modern peasant organizations³¹.

It is seen that in some important peasant movements such as Rungpur rebellion, the intellectuals had played an important role in organising the peasants, but in Assam the intellectuals were totally touched out from this problem. The higher class society did not help them to achieve in their aim³². 'Hindoo Patriot' the popular newspaper of Bengal published regular reports about the planters oppression, official partisanship and peasant resistance. Din Bandhu Mitra's play 'Neel Darpan' had portrayed a detail picture of the oppression of the peasants by the planters³³. Anyway, in Assam the demand for revenue deduction was supported by the 'Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha'³⁴.

It is worth questioning that at first the leaders of Indian National Congress did not give importance to the problems of the peasants. They regarded the issue of peasant movement as the local problem of Assam. So, we did not see any protest action through the Indian National Congress on the issue of peasant movements of Assam. After the Swadeshi Movement of 1905 the leaders of the Indian National Congress realised the importance of this class to achieve in their goal. Assam Association which was formed in 1903 took a leading role in the development of political awareness among the people of Assam. Manik Chandra Barua who was an active member of the Assam Association stood on behalf of the peasants and tried to focus how this class was exploited by colonial government Phanidhar Chaliha, Ghanasyam Barua, Muhammad Sadullah criticised the grazing tax imposed on the peasants³⁵. The participation of peasantry in the non-cooperation movement was very spontaneous. Their participation gave a new identity to the peasants of Assam. It made them politically conscious. Gradually they realised the importance of broad based organisation which would become their saviour. The widespread peasant struggle, based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non cultivating land owners, made an impact on the

contemporary Assamese society. But it was the poor peasantry and other sections of the rural people, including artisans who gave it a militant character³⁶.

Another far reaching impact of the peasant uprisings was that from the later part of the 19th century, the middle class sections of society gradually involved with the peasant organisation. The Rayat Sabha's showed another way to the peasants to redress their grievances. Through the Rayat Sabhas the peasants began to protest and want their rights through democratic means. The place of Raj mels were adopted by Rayat Sabhas. All people irrespective of caste, class and religion, the peasants were associated with the Rayat Sabhas. So, the Rayat Sabhas had adopted the character of "national organisations". Involvement of eminent persons gave a new strength to the Rayat Sabhas. Some important Rayat Sabhas which focussed the grievances of the peasants were such as Tezpur Rayat Sabha, Nowgong Rayat Sabha, Charing Rayat Sabha, Salaguri Rayat Sabha, Jamuguri Rayat Sabha etc³⁷. These Rayat Sabhas had played an important role towards the growth of political consciousness among the peasants of Assam.

Conclusion: From the above discussion it is seen that the peasant movements of the 19th century took an important role to focus the nature of the British rule in Assam. The land revenue and the land settlement policy of the British government was governed by the introduction of tea plantation, existence of coal, oil etc. in Assam. The prospect of tea in Assam inspired Jenkins to suggest in 1833 his first experimental measure, a colonization scheme for setting the English Capitalists in the wastelands of Assam. The British officials were even prepared to drive out the indigenous peasants from the traditional homeland and to open tea gardens in a vast area. By the assessment of arable land, they compelled the peasants to work in the tea gardens and others. Against the nominal tax or absence of it on plantation land, revenue on other cultivable land increased at an enormous rate. The peasants did not find response to their petitions which they sent to the British government and it made them angry. Though the peasant movements were dominated with strong hands but it proved that the common masses of Assam became aware about the exploitation of the British rule. The then popular Bangla newspaper 'Amrit Bazar Patrika' in the editorial wrote about the growth of peasant discontent in this way. 'In the Deccan the fury of the riots was against money lenders in Bengal, against indigo planters in Pabna, against the Zamindars, but in Assam at this movement it is an open rebellion against the government³⁸. Gradually they began to realise that it would not be possible for them to redress their grievances under the colonial rule, so they actively joined in the national movements to end the British rule from the country.

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