

প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo

A journal of Humanities & Social Science

Chief Editor: Bishwajit Bhattacharjee

Published by: Dept. of Bengali

Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India.

Website: www.thecho.in

NANKAR UPRISING OF SURMA-BARAK VALLEY FROM 1914 – 64

Sumsun Noor Choudhury,

PhD Scholar, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar,

Email: sn_choudhury@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The Nankar uprising of Sylhet District now in Bangladesh and present Karimganj District of India was a purely subaltern uprising, a series of which took place at different places of pre portioned Sylhet of erstwhile Surmavalley. At the time of British rule the permanent settlement was extended over the District, but in a peculiar form.

One features of the Zamindari or Mirashdary system of Sylhet was that the Mirashdars or land holders possessed Nankar Proza (tenants). They cultivated the land and enjoyed the product of land without paying any revenue to the landlords. But they had to render free services in houses or agricultural fields of Mirashdars or Zamindars, whatever might be case. The term Nankar is derived from Persian words Nan and kar. The Nan means Bread and Kar means service. So the term Nankar means earning of bread in exchange of service. Actually the Nankar Proza or subject was such a wretched person who has no land of his own for cultivation and even constructing his home and hearth. Again, the person was a saleable commodity along with landed property.

The revenue system which prevalent in medieval sylhet gave the shape of Nankar system which continued to British period with modification. Socio- economic condition of the Nankar was beggar's description. However, this group of mankind once mustered courage to rise against their Masters which developed the Nankar uprising in different places of present Surma – Barak Valley and Sylhet division of Bangladesh.

The present Sylhet division of Bangladesh and Karimganj District of India formed the District of Sylhet, during the British period. This District was bounded on the North by the District of Khasi and Jaintia Hills (present Meghalaya); on the East by the Jaintia Hills, for a short distance and by Cachar and Hailakandi Districts as far as Lusai Hills (Mizoram); on the South by the semi independent state of Hill Tipperah (present Tripura state); on the West by the District of Maimansing (Bangladesh). The

Boundary of this District was for the first time fixed by Todar Mall's famous assessment at the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar, and during the colonial period, it again came under assessment by the Notification of British government, dated 18th June 1874.

Within this boundary, there was a peculiar system connected with Zamindari system that the Mirashdars and the land holders would possess Nankar subjects, whose conditions were not better than

bonded laborers. The Nankars cultivated the land and enjoyed the product of land without paying any revenue to the Zamindars or Mirashdars. But they had to render free services in the house of Zamindars or Mirashdars, whatever might be the case. The term Nankar is derived from Persian words *Nan* and *Kar*. *Nan* means bread and *Kar* means service. Actually the Nankar *proza* (Tenant) was such a wretched person who had no land of his own for cultivation and for constructing his home and hearth. Again, the person was a saleable commodity along with landed property. So the Nankar *Proza* (Tenant) may be called landless labourers and partial bonded labourers, because they had to render free services in the houses of Zamindars or Mirashdars or their family members.

The early history of Surma valley (present Sylhet Division of Bangladesh and Karimganj District of India) is hazy and not clear, due to absence of available source materials and evidence. Only a broad outline with major gaps can be attempted. The traces of the Nankar system are also found in the early ages, which are evident from the land grants issued by different ancient rulers of Sylhet. R.S. Sharma, on the basis of *Purana* comments that villages with agricultural peasants (*khetaka*) should be transferred to the Brahmanas. It also advises that Temples and Mathas should be provided with lands and slaves and given facilities for dance and music, which would imply the gift of dancers and musicians. From the *Nidanpur* Copper inscription issued by king Vaskarbarmana it is learned that the region had been within Kamrup kingdom for about a hundred years since sixth century A.D. The Aryanisation of the region under the leadership of the pioneer immigrant Brahmanas with plough based agriculture as economic basis had its beginning during this period. From the *Kalapur* Copper plate issued by Samatata king on the eastern Bengal incorporated the entire region within his Banga kingdom. During this period, the Chandrapura Matha or Monastery situated at Panchakanda

became a very reputed centre for learning. From two *Bhatara* inscription of Govindakeshaba Deva and Ishand Devas it has founded 375 *hales* of land grant given to the Brahmanas in Sylhet region for the purpose of serving the Lord Shiva. The Lord Shiva was also endowed with many attendances such as Bellmetal workers, Washermen, Baotmen etc. In the early days, most of the lands of Sylhet were waste lands and Irfan Habib in his work “Agrarian System of Mughal India” mentioned that Sylhet was a dense forest area in early days.

Most of the land grants given to the Brahmanas in Sylhet were waste lands and widely granted mainly for two reasons:-

Firstly, to serve the Temples and Mathas by the society and Brahmanas were in the top of the social pyramid. The Brahmanas were assisted by other classes of the society such as Washer men, Cobbler, Boatmen, Barber etc. In return of services, other classes of the society of Sylhet received lands from Brahmanas for their livelihood by cultivating the allotted land. Secondly, to make the waste lands fruitful for agriculture.

So the basic features of the Nankar System had been found in the early land grants of Sylhet. In the Sultanate period the prevalent land grant was continuing but different kinds of tax were imposed on the people of lower section of Sylhet and the Mughals kept the said system with modification. As the Mughal administration was highly centralized and during the reign of Akbar entire Sylhet came under a Sarkar. The Sylhet was ruled by Amil, locally called Fouzder. In the Mughal period, in spite of giving salary to the royal employees, land grants were often made to them and the allotted land was called Nan Land.

The continuation of the early land grants and land tenure system of the Mughal times, the Nankar system was a particularly debilitating and anachronistic one, which the British rule supported for their own interest. The practice of having wage less labours in exchange of food formed a favorable climate in Sylhet district of Surma valley where

landlessness and poverty stricken people were widespread, and where small or medium size landlords called Mirishdars out-numbered Zamindars.

According to the permanent settlement 1793, in Sylhet district the Choudhuries were the prime land holders but there had been small land holders like Tapadars and Talukdars. In the social system, the Britishers had adopted a peculiar policy i.e. the landholders who paid revenue more than (pancha-satta) Rupees five hundred to the British Govt. they were termed as Zamindars. The land holders who paid revenue more than Rupees fifty only and less than Rupees five hundred were called Mirishdars and those landholders who paid less than Rupees fifty they were termed as Tapaders and Talukdars.

Under the Mughal rule the Mughal official's maintained local army who were assisted by the royal army as and when called by the Mughal Emperor. But In Sylhet, under the permanent settlement system, the land holders possessed Nankar Proza (subject). They cultivated the land and enjoyed the product of land without paying any tax. But they had to render free services in the houses of land holders and this system was locally called *HOD-BAGARI*. In Sylhet, the Nankar Tenants not only provided free services in the houses of land holders but also they protected the entire area of land lords from internal and external forces.

In the slave system, the Master is responsible for providing cloth, food, houses to his slave, but in Nankar system nothing was provided to Nankar except some cultivable land. The land holders provided only a small piece of rent free land from his Khas tract locally called *KHANA-BARI* and in return the Nankar had to surrender his entire life and freedom to the hands of land holders. On failure or denial of the orders of Mirashdars the Nankar tenants were inflicted with vigorous physical punishment. So the condition of the Nankar tenants was more deplorable than the house hold servants.

However, the Nankar tenents were classified according to their occupation as fallows:-

- i) Kiran : The word comes from Kissan (Peasant) and their occupation was to work in the agricultural fields of self (allotted land by land lord landlord) and landholders. They were also providing free-services at the houses of landholders and most of the Latieales (gaurds) were selected from Kiran community.
- ii) Bhandari : This section of people were working as cook at the houses of land holders.
- iii) Namasudra : They were fishing in the lakes of landholders and making bamboo articles and also involved in cultivating.
- iv) Patni : Their main occupation was Boating and fishing.
- v) Maimal : Fisherman and their occupation was to keep fish in the khas land or bil (lake) of the landholders and they had to give major portion of fish to the landholders.
- vi) Malaker : Their work was to carry palanquin locally called Palki of landholders and their family members.
- vii) Napit or Hazam :- Napit belongs to Hindu barber community and Hazam represented the Muslim barber community. The duty of the both were cutting the hair, nail etc of the land holders and their family members.
- viii) Duli or Bajani :- Duli means Hindu musician and Bajani means muslim musician. The works of the both were to

presenting entertainment through their musical instrument at the time of functions of the house of land holders.

- ix) Dhupa : Dhupa means laundrymen. Their work was to wash the cloths of land holders and their family members.
- x) Mutchi : Muchi means cobbler and their main occupation was making shoes. They had to make the shoes of land holders and their family members.
- xi) Khasai : They slaughtered the animals specially in the time of ceremonial functions of the houses of land holders or other places.
- xii) Patikar : These people were making mats and by sailing the mats they earned their living and presented mats to the landholders from time to time.

The Nankar uprising of Sylhet District now in Bangladesh and present Karimganj District of India was a purely subaltern uprising, a series of which took place at different places of pre portioned Sylhet of erstwhile Surmavalley. However, this group of mankind once mustered courage to rise against their Masters which developed the Nankar uprising in different places of present Surma – Barak Valley. With the out break of the First World War (1914) the Nankar uprising was started. During this period many Nankar uprisings against Zamindars and Mirashdars took place. But all these were suppressed by the Zamindars and Mirashdars, as the Nankars were not organized and not led by any able person. However, the Churkhai Nankar uprising 1922, (now in Bangladesh), the Kulahura Nankar uprising 1931, (now in

Bangladesh), left great impact on future Nankar uprising of Surma-Barak valley.

The second phase of Nankar uprising started in an organized way in 1937. From 1937 to 1946 number of Nankar uprisings had taken place. Some uprisings were suppressed and some uprisings compelled the government to rethink about the pattern of land revenue system. The Badeshwer uprising of 1938, (now in Bangladesh), the Ronykholi uprising 1938-39, (now in Bangladesh), Nankar uprising of Lauta Bahadurpur 1945, (now in Bangladesh), the Batarashi uprising of 1946, (now in Karimganj district of Assam), the Mohakol uprising of 1946, (now in Karimganj district of Assam), and Kuna-Saleshwar uprising of 1946, (now in Bangladesh), brought a great inspiration among the Nankar tenants of Surma-Barak valley.

The third phase was begun with the independence of India and emerged with two Nations i.e India and Pakistan. The Sylhet District of Surma valley was also divided in to two parts, Sylhet (Pakistan) and Karimganj (India). Though the partition took place but the Nankar revolt was continuing in both sides. During the third phase the Nankar uprising continued along with the Peasants movement of the district of Sylhet and Karimganj sub-division of Cachar district. In this period the Nankar uprising reached in its pick. In 1949, the Uluree (Saneswar) movement took place and six Nankar tenants had been killed in police firing and the famous daroga, Korom Ali who had earned notoriously of murdering immigrant Muslims in Nowagaon, Assam was given the responsibility of Saneswar police post for suppressing of the on going Nankar Movement.. Able Peasant leaders like Ajoy Bhattacharjee, Ismail Ali, Aparna Paul Choudhury, and Shusma Dey along with others volunteered to lead the uprising. As a result the Nankar uprising along with the Peasant movement turned in to a mass movement. The Pakistan Government arrested the Nankar leaders like Mr. Ajoy Bhattacharjee, Sishir Bhattacharjee, Ismail

Ali and Sudhanya and put them in to jail for long time.

On 18th August 1949, under the leadership of Aparna Paul Choudhury, Ashita Paul Choudhury and Susma Dey a meeting was held and about thousands of peasants gathered to protest against police atrocities and demanded release of the leaders of Nankar Movement from jail but the Pakistani Government suppressed the move by arresting the said leaders and the judge of the Sylhet court awarded them six month imprisonment. In 1950, the Govt. of the then East Pakistan and in 1951, the govt. of Assam passed an Act. In which the peasants or Royats were given "Joth right" (occupancy right) over land they cultivated but the Nankar tradition was continuing in both sides.

In 1956 the Nankar tenants of Banugash (Sylhet) rose against their Zamindar who tried to suppress the revolt by using police force but the move killed a police officer on the spot. Finally the

government could realize that the problems of the Nankar peasants and in 1956 the govt. abolished the total Mirishdari or Zamindary system in Bangladesh. In 1958-59 the Nankar tenants of Nalua, Bagon and Medol village of Karimganj sub-division (India) rose against the traditional Nankar system with the help of Kishan Sabha. The landlords of said area tried to suppress the move by filing theft case against the Nankar leaders but the movement could not be stopped. Ultimately by the Act. of 1961, 1962, 1963 and 1964 the government of Assam abolished the Mirishdari or Zamindary system in (Karimganj) Assam.

However, the governments of both side abolished the total Mirishdari or Zamindary system and with the abolition of this system, the Nankar system disappeared from Sylhet district of Bangladesh and Karimganj district of India. But there is still tension among ex-Mirishdars. Ex-tenants and other social classes in both sides i.e. India and Bangladesh.

Reference

1. Land Records of Karimganj district from 1890-1964, Record Room of D.C, Karimganj, official petitions and letters.
2. Records Room of Sylhet district of Bangladesh from 1850-1956, official petitions and letters.
3. "India" by Al – Biruni, Edited by Qeyamuddin Ahmed, 1983, New Delhi.
4. "The A-in-i Akbari" by -Abul-Fazl Allami, Translated by H. Blochmann, 1927, Delhi.
5. "A Statistical Account of Assam" By - W.W. Hunter, London, 1879.
6. The Bengal Permanent Settlement Regulation of 1793.
7. The Bengal act of 1869.
8. Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886.
9. The Sylhet Tenancy Act – 1936, published in Assam Gazette of the 6th January 1937.
10. The Assam Code 1956, Shillong, 1956.
11. "Nankar Bidroha" Vol- I, II, & III, by Bhattacharjee, Ajoy, Dhaka- 1100,
- 12 "Srihatter Itibritta" Purbonsho and Uttarangsho, by Choudhury, Achyut Charan, Shahbag-1000, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1913.
13. "Early Medieval Indian Society (A Study of Feudalization)", Orient Longman Limited, Kolkata, 2001
