

Popular Peasants Uprising in Colonial Assam : A Witnesses of Brithish Exploitation

Atul Das, Assistant Professor,
Department of History, Dhemaji College,
Dhemaji, Assam, Pincode: 787057
Mobile: 7002401194, Gmail: debajyotimili@gmail.com

Abstract

The British rule had radically transformed the socio-economic fabric of the Indian rural society. As a part of the British Empire, Assam also became victim of the economic policy of the British. Especially, the peasantry, the largest social groups of Assam was the most exploited by the imperialist economic policy of the Britishers. The radical and sweeping administrative changes brought about the British administration profoundly affected the peasants whose condition began to deteriorate with every reassessment. Peasants' life were made even more difficult as a result of new levies and an increase in property income. Peasants in Assam, no matter their race, class, or religious affiliation, recognised the persecution they faced under British rule. To protest the increased rates of land taxes as well as the imposition of additional taxes, a series of peasant uprisings took occurred in Assamese in the late 19th century.

Keywords: Peasants, land revenue, economic exploitation, reassessment.

Objective of the paper:

The main objectives of the paper are to findout:-

- To study about the back ground of the peasant uprising in colonial Assam.
- To analyse the main features of the peasant uprisings.
- To determine the extent whereby the Assamese people's uprisings were effective in awakening their democratic sensibilities.

Methodology:

The present study is based on secondary data, collected from books, journals and electronic sources.

Introduction:

They have governed the government in India from the beginning of British rule in order to satisfy their own colonial interests. They always saw India as a colonial market, and they tried to take advantage of the country's resources as often as possible.

The transfer of control from the East India to the crown in November 1858 made things considerably worse Indians. Exploitation of the country's resources continued unchecked, reducing the population to victims of poverty. New sources of income had to be found, as well as the financial sector had to be restructured, as a consequence of the massive deficit generated by the insurrection of 1857. The increase in land income and the implementation of additional levies had such a negative impact on the whole rural population that peasants from all regions of the nation staged a series of violent protests. The indigo rebellion of 1859–60 in Bengal, the revolts of Poona and Ahmadnagar districts in Maharashtra, the Mappila breakout in Malabar, the Ramosi Peasant force in Maharashtra in 1879, and the Kuka revolt in Punjab were all big peasant uprisings that shook the nation. In 1826, the British acquired control of Assam, which was mostly depopulated as well as destitute. The income generated in Assam was insufficient to cover administrative costs, forcing the British authorities to levy agriculture related levies that were very onerous to peasants.

The massive deficit created by the uprising of 1857 compelled the British authorities to restructure Assam's financial system. The property tax was raised from 80 percent to percent after 1857. Along with land income, the British looked for other ways to make money.

Assam adopted stamp taxes in 1858, income tax in 1860, and a ten percent uniform import tariff in 1858. At the Sadar Stations of Kamrup, Darrang, and Nowgong, excise charges were imposed. Gold washing was also outsourced, and the right to fish on rivers as well as beels were auctioned off to the winning price. Timber and reed cutting, as well as the usage of grazing pastures, are now taxed. The evaluation of forest areas producing Som tree, in which Muga worms are placed under taxes, further impoverished the ryots. The British government's policy of extracting income in case produced significant dissatisfaction and misery among the peasants due to a lack of money supplies as well as relatively restricted trading possibilities for farm products. In Assam, the peasant community's grievances were expressed in a number of uprisings. They used Rajmel (people's assembly) to voice their dissatisfaction. Both Muslims and Hindus banded together under the leadership of their respective Gossains, Dolois, as well as village headmen to protest the British government's unjustified income assessment.

Phulaguri uprising (1861):

The Phulaguri Uprising was the first agrarian revolt in Assam against the protest of British economic exploitation. The main cause of this uprising was the opium policy of the British government. A rich source of revenue in Assam which attracted the notice of the government was opium cultivation. Opium was generally cultivated on bari and chapari

lands, which were assessed at a lower rate. In the middle of the 19th century British Officers like Robinson and Mills observed that about three fourths of the people of Assam to be opium addicts.¹ The planters who had been facing on acute shortage of labour, believing that widespread consumption of opium would make the local people apathetic to work and recommended the government to ban on poppy cultivation and increase of land revenue on poppy cultivated land.² At that time the British government also carried monopoly of opium trade and made a huge profit and realized that if locally poppy cultivation continued, their profit would be decreased. In 1860, the British government has banned poppy cultivation as well as increased land income on poppy cultivation lands in all districts save Kamrup by 15 - 20 percent.³

The president's policies repeatedly stifled the peasant sector in Assam, notably in Nowgong, the state's major opium-producing area. Rumours also emerged that the government was considering levying taxes on houses, homesteads (baris), betelvine (pan), as well as arecanut (tamul) agriculture.⁴ This sparked protests, especially among the tribal population (Tiwa ethnic tribe) in the Phulaguri region, some 15 kilometres from the present-day town of Nowgong, who relied on poppy cultivation. On the 17th of September 1861, roughly a thousand ryots marched to the Sadar Court in Nowgong to express their dissatisfaction with the opium cultivation prohibition and the proposed levy on tamul as well as pan cultivation. The Deputy Director of Nowgong, Lt. Herbert Sconce, who was accustomed to deal with the ryots in a harsh and confrontational way, declined to hear their concerns.⁵

The offended ryots chose not to pay the tax and called a Rajj-Mel (people assembly) in Phulaguri for five days starting October 15 to allow peasants from the most remote villages to join in the deliberations.⁶ Every day, the number of people visiting the Mel grew, until on the 17th of October 1861, over three to four thousands peasants had gathered, the majority of them equipped with lathis. On the 18th of October, Lt. Singer, an assistant commissioner of the Nowgong district police, was killed by collected ryots while attempting to disperse the ryots by violence, and his corpse was dumped into to the Kalang River. The ryots mainly involved encounter with British force were TumbaLalung, Kati Lalung, BhugbarLalung, MoniKonch, KalyanKonch, Kali Deka, DodhiLalung, BahuKaibortta, JatiKalita etc. Deputy Commissioner Herbert Sconce was so worried that he sent an armed team to the scene. There was gunfire, and several people died, and several more who were hurt.⁷ Forty-one people were detained on suspicion of involvement in the murder case, as well as eight or nine leadership were sentenced to death or deportation⁸. This episode is still remembered by people of Assam as the Phulaguri Dhawa or the battle of Phulaguri.

The Assam Riots:

The insurrection in Phulaguri did not halt the increase in revenue or the supply of government opium. In the Assam valley districts, the government can raise the revenue rates on rupit as well as non-rupit lands from 25% to 50.⁹ The people of Darrang as well as Kamrup, in particular, protested via their Rajjmels against the brutal imposition of increased

assessment fees. Beginning in December 1893, after Sir William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, conducted a fresh assessment as well as raised the land tax by 70% to 100%, a series of protests called as the "Assam Riots" erupted.¹⁰

When memorials, Prayers and Petitions bore no fruit, the aggrieved ryots of several tahsil of Kamrup and Darrang launched thereupon a non-tax campaign by the mels and the ryots were threatened with fine and excommunication in the event of their paying revenue to the government. Further they were warned with dire consequences against accepting auction property of their fellow villagers. The question was; 'which is the permanent authority, the mel or the Sarkar'.¹¹

On the morning of December 24, 1893, looting of the Rangia Bazar began the movement in Rangia. The crowd demolished the huts of the marketplace the same evening after visiting a mel at Belagaon, near Rangia, and warned a Marwari shopkeeper that they might return on the 30th to pillage his business. On the 30th of December, a mob of over 3,000 people gathered in Rangia as well as staged a nighttime rally, threatening to damage the thana, post office, and Tahsidar's office. R. B. McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, came at Rangia on January 6, 1894, as well as arrested a number of leaders engaged in the incident of December 24. On the 10th of January, a throng of roughly 3,000 armed people with clubs assembled in an open area near the Rangia Thana.¹² When they were asked to disperse, not only did they disobey, but were gradually drawing nearer thana with cries 'we won't pay the increased revenue'. In the evening, they attempted to release the arrested leaders by forcing their way in to the thana, whereupon the police resorted to firing which compelled them to disperse without much casualty.¹³ Rajj-mels in Nalbari, Baram, Bajali and other places continued to be as active as before.

When a mouzadar and a mandal tried to collect tax forcefully in a hamlet called Kapla near Lachima in the Sarukhetrimouza in the Kamrup region on January 21, 1894, they were severely attacked. A few days later, the mouzadar died.¹⁴ Due to the ryots' menacing attitude, McCabe came at Lachima on January 24 with a company of sepoy, detained 59 people, as well as imprisoned them in a makeshift jail. A large throng of some 3000 people gathered next to his camp, demanding the release of the detained leaders as well as refusing to pay taxes. McCabe, on the other hand, refused to give in to their demands as well as deployed fixed bayonets to separate the aggressive ryots.¹⁵

Patharughat Uprising:

Patharughat, 12 kilometers from current Mangaldoi town in Darrang district, had the most significant as well as deadly peasant rebellion. On the 24th of January 1894, information reached J.D. Anderson, Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, of mels for days at a time in Sipajhar, Kalaigaon, as well as Mangaldoitahsils, not only to protest the rise in tax rates, but also to resist those who would be paying income for the government.¹⁶ On the 27th, Deputy Commissioner Anderson came to Patharughat with a military detachment led by Lt.

Berrington, anticipating fresh trouble. When Berrington and his police team went to attach the properties of the defaulting ryots on the morning of the 28th, they managed to get away from a crowd of roughly 200 individuals. Approximately 2000 ryots gathered at the front of the rest house where Anderson was camped to protest the increased estimation of the amount. Anderson, on the other hand, not only failed to cooperate with their requests, but also cautioned them about the dangers of holding any mel and the repercussions of failing to disperse. The ryots stood firm in their refusal to move until their demands were satisfied. They were then forcibly tried by Berrington, who issued a lathi charge order. The ryots were enraged as well as started throwing sticks, bamboos, and dirt clods at the officers. According to the official account, Berrington finally authorized open flame, which killed 15 ryots and injured 37 others. However, according to a non-government report, 140 ryots were killed and 150 were wounded.¹⁷ The government's severe cruelty towards the Patharughatryots triggered upheaval in other parts of India as well. The Doliran, or combat waged with clods of earth even by ryots against the kings' military force, is still recalled from the Patharughat event.

Findings:

The peasant uprisings in Assam was attributed to the peasants' discontent with the severe increase in land tax. They were protesting the exploitation of the British government's budget.

Regardless of the fact that the British perceived these upheavals as a negative result of the Rajj-mels, these Rajj-mels were just a forum for them to vent their grievances.

Peasants, like peasant uprisings in other areas of India, emerged as the driving force behind agricultural revolution in Assam. Their goal was to solve their own concerns, not to end colonial control.¹⁸

Because of their bravery as well as sacrificing spirit, the British government was obliged to lift various illegal restrictions imposed on them. On March 29, 1894, Rash Behari Ghosh presented the subject before the Imperial Legislative Council, harshly criticising the government's budget tactics in Asam. As a result, Assam's land revenue has indeed been reduced from 32.7 % to 32.7 % by the British government. This exemplified the significance of peasant revolt in Assam's prosperity. In Assam, the peasant revolt was unique for being limited to a specific group or geographic area. They were more connected to their cultural groups than to socioeconomic backgrounds. They also don't have any long-term groupings or continuous conflicts. Their movements as well as organisations disintegrated after their objectives were met. As a consequence, they were no longer a danger to British dominance.¹⁹ It has been seen on occasion that a peaceful assembly rapidly devolved into bloodshed due to a lack of suitable preparations as well as programmes. They were unable to devise a struggle strategy that would unify and organise peasants and other people in society for national political action. In the lack of an ideology, a programme, leadership, and a battle strategy,

The British government found it simple to put down these uprisings. However, it is true that all these movements aid in the development of forceful battles centred on class objectives and the formation of contemporary peasant organisations. However the non-agriculture classes remained silent on the topic of Assam's peasant movement, with the foundation of the Assam Association in 1903, they started to say out. Manic Chandra Barua, Secretary of the Assam Association, spoke on favor of the peasants and attempted to bring attention to how the British authority abused this class. The grazing fee imposed on farmers was condemned by Phanidhar Chaliha, Ghanasyam Barua, as well as Muhammad Shadulla.²⁰

Assamese peasants gained a new identity as a result of their involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement. It heightened their political consciousness while also emphasising the need of broad-based organising. With time, Assam's middle and lower classes grow more involved with peasant organisations. Tezpur Ryot Sabha, Nowgon Ryot Sabha, Jamuguri Ryot Sabha, and Salaguri Ryot Sabha formed the Rayat Shabha to address peasant issues. Rajj-mels has been superseded by Ryot Sabha.²¹ The Ryot Sabhas were open to everyone, regardless of caste, class, or religion. As a result, the Ryot Sabhas attained the status of "National Organization." These Ryot Sabhas were instrumental in the development of political awareness among Assamese peasants.

Conclusion

As a result of the preceding debate as well as analysis, it can be established that the peasant movement of the 19th century played an essential part in bringing the colonial aspect of British rule in Assam to light. They never considered the people of Assam to be their subjects as well as worked for their welfare as rulers. The introduction of tea plantations, the presence of coal, oil, and other natural resources in Assam regulated the British government's land revenue and land settlement policies. Despite the lack of a nominal tax on plantation land, income on other cultivable land surged at an incredible rate. The Rajj-mels of Assam's several districts, but instead subsequently the Ryot Sabhas, by unifying the peasants, increased awareness of the Britishers' colonial economic policies. Gradually, they recognized that they would be unable to resolve their problems under colonial control, and they have become involved in the national effort to remove British rule from the country.

Note and References:

1. Gait, Edward, A History of Assam, Calcutta, P. 382
2. Antrobus A. A., A History of the Assam Company, Edinburg; P. 99
3. Home Political – B
4. Barpujari, H. K., The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. –V, Publication Board, Assam, 2007; P. 15
5. Barpujari, H. K., Ibid; P. 15

6. Baruah, S. L., A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshiram Monaharlal Publisher, New Delhi, 2015; P. 501
7. Dutta, K. N., Landmark in the freedom struggle in Assam, Guwahati, 196; P. 29
8. Barpujari, H. K., Political History of Assam; Vol. I, Guwahati, 1977; P. 92
9. Gait, Edward, Op.cit; P. 347
10. Baruah, S. L., Op.cit; P. 503
11. Barpujari, H. K., Op.cit; P. 31
12. Barpujari, H. K., Op.cit; P. 31
13. Guha, Amalendu, Planter Raj to Swaraj, New Delhi, 1977; P. 41
14. Barpujari, H. K., Op.cit; P. 32
15. Baruah, S. L., Op.cit; P. 505
16. Barpujari, H. K., Op.cit; P. 33
17. Baruah, S. L., Op.cit; P. 505
18. Chandra, Bipan, India's struggle for Independence, Penguin Books, New Delhi; P. 58
19. Chandra, Bipan, I.bid; P.58
20. Chandra, Bipan, I.bid; P.59
21. Goswami, Srutidev, Unabinsha Satikar Krishak Bidroharu Krishakar Jatiyabadi Chetanar Unmesh" in Ramesh Chandra Klita (ed.) Swadhinata Andolonaru Asom; Assam Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, 2008, P. 67
