



The Impact of British Rule and Peasant Uprisings in 19th Century Assam : A Historical Study

Raja Doley,

Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, R.G. Baruah College

Abstract: The British policy of exploitation had a significant impact on the lives people in Assam. The enhancement of land revenue and imposition of new taxes by the British government forced the people to live in miserable conditions. The peasant community of the state was a major segment that suffered greatly during the colonial period. The exploited peasants in the rural areas, also known as rayats, assembled through village assembly called *raij mels* to express their resentment against the unjustified assessment of land revenue and the imposition of unfamiliar new taxes. As a result, a series of peasant uprisings broke out in various parts of the region, particularly in tribal populated areas, in protest against British rule. Thus, peasant discontent became a significant feature in the context of the freedom movement in Assam. This paper aims to examine the impact of the British rule on the peasants of Assam, as well as the popular peasant uprisings that occurred in various parts of the State.

Keywords: Peasant uprising, *rayats*, British rule, open fire, *raij mels*, land revenue.

Introduction

With the advent of the British in 1826, the political and socio-economic scenario of the entire Assam underwent significant change. It was a largely depopulated and impoverished a state due to prolonged uprisings, internal dissensions, and frequent Burmese invasions, which occurred during the later part of the Ahom rule. Considering the prevailing circumstances regarding economic measures, the British did not undertake any significant changes; rather, they continued the existing system of the Ahom rule. However, in due course of time, the British began to introduce new administrative measures and imposed new taxes to meet their various expenditures and to fulfil their colonial economic interests. With respect to the country, after the great revolt of 1857 which caused a major financial deficit, the British government, with a view to reorganizing the financial system, introduced several new Acts in India. Thus, stamp duties were introduced in 1858; following that, income tax and a uniform import tariff of ten per cent were also imposed in 1860. The British administration also brought about major change in the economic administration of Assam. Accordingly, excise duties were levied at the Sadar stations of Kamrup, Darrang, and Nowgong. The administration had already farmed out the rights to wash gold and the right to fish in river and *beels* was offered to the highest bidder. Taxes were imposed on the cutting of timber and reeds and on the use of grazing fields. Simultaneously, various agrarian taxes were imposed on the agricultural products at different places and at different times. As a result, peasant discontentment against the British was evident in the rural areas of the state. Consequently, a series of peasant rebellions broke out against the enhancement of land revenue and the imposition of new taxes in the latter half of the 19th century. All these peasant rebellions were organized through the medium of village organizations called *raij-mels*, or people's assemblies. Thus, rural people, also called *rayats*, were united under the leadership of *Gosains*, *Dalais* or *Gaonburhas* in their respective

areas to protest against the arbitrary and unjustified assessment of the British Government without any distinction of religion, whether Hindu or Muslim and communal feelings.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is descriptive-cum-analytical. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of information. Relevant materials and data have been collected from a variety of sources including books, articles, journals, published works, proceedings, and web-based resources.

The Popular Peasant Uprising of Phulaguri

In addition to the mentioned factors above, another important reason for the peasant rebellions of Assam was the imposition of exploitative taxes by the British on local agricultural products as well as other taxes introduced from time to time. For instance, the British increased the tax on non-*rupit* land by 15 to 30 percent. Another important factor was the ban on opium cultivation in 1860. The reason behind the ban on opium cultivation was that the British government noticed that opium was one of the rich sources of revenue in the state. It was cultivated on *bari* and *chapani* lands, which were already assessed at a lower tax rate. Therefore, the British intended to bring the opium cultivation under their control in order to collect more revenue. At the same time, the British planters, facing a shortage of labour, urged the government to enhance the land revenue so that peasants, unable to pay higher land taxes would join the plantations. It was also believed that the local people had become apathetic to work due to widespread opium consumption. Therefore, the planters also recommended that the government ban the cultivation and sale of opium.

Such measures adopted by the British government severely affected the economy of the peasants in Assam, particularly in Nowgong, which was the largest opium-producing district in the region. Rumours were also spread that, soon, the cultivation of *tamul* (areca nut) and *pan* (betel leaf) would be made taxable. Hearing this, rural cultivators also known as rayats became agitated, mainly amongst the tribal populations known as the Lalungs of the Phulaguri area under Nowgong district. In September 1861, around 1,500 rayats marched to the Sadar at Nowgong in order to protest against the ban on opium cultivation and the imposition of tax on *tamul* and *pan* cultivation. However, the district authorities were not ready to hear the complaints lodged by the rayats. As a result, the situation became critical and volatile. On 18th October, Lt. Singer, the Assistant Commissioner, himself appeared with a police party in the protest area. The leaders of the rayats, headed by Jati Kalita, reiterated their complaints. However, instead of trying to resolve the issue, he became enraged with the people and ordered them to disperse and tried to seize their bamboo *lathis*. In this situation, one person from the infuriated people suddenly struck Lt. Singer and threw him into the Kolong River. After that, police firing took place, in which several people lost their lives and many were injured. Forty one persons were arrested on charges of murder and eight or nine were punished with death or deportation. The incident is remembered as the Phulaguri Dhawa or the battle of Phulaguri in Assam. This incident was regarded not only as a conflict between the agitating crowd and the armed force of the government for prohibition of opium cultivation, but also as the earliest spontaneous popular movement in the region against the policy of colonial exploitation.

The Assam Riots (1893 - 94)

The Assam riots refer to a series of protests by the rayats in several places in Assam, such as Rangia and Lachima in Kamrup and Patharughat in the Darrang district and other parts of the state, to protest against the enhancement of land tax imposed by the British government. The movement began in December 1893, when Sir William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam made a new assessment and increased land revenue by 70-80 percent and in some cases, even up to 100 percent. The people of the specific areas mentioned above launched a no-tax campaign, declaring that anyone who disobeyed the decisions of the *raij-mels* would face excommunication as a penalty. However, these protests were not only against the British but also against the Marwari traders, who exploited the peasants and monopolized internal trade in Assam.

Moreover, it was evident that even after the Phulaguri uprising, the British government neither stopped the enhancement of land revenue nor the supply of government opium. Furthermore, the British government strengthened its armed forces to create a sense of fear among the *rayats*. It was recorded that in 1868-69, the government increased the rate of land revenue on *rupit* and *non-rupit* land from 25 to 50 percent in the state. The people of the rural areas reacted with agitation through *raij-mels*. The British government suppressed them by show of force, so that holding of *raij-mels* had to be given up by them. However, the *rayats* continued to gather in the *Namghar* or *Mosques* to explore new ways of protesting against the British government.

In such circumstances, the first movement started at Rangia bazar on 24th December 1893, where the infuriated people looted shops and held demonstrations for several days. To control the situation, on 6th January 1894, R. B. McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup arrived at the spot and arrested a number of leaders. However, on 10 January, a huge crowd assembled in an open field and marched to the Rangia *thana* to forcibly release their arrested leaders during which, the police opened fire. Considering the critical situation, McCabe banned the holding of *raij-mels* without prior permission from the district authorities and also called for additional armed forces from Tezpur and Darrang. Meanwhile, McCabe was able to bring some leaders to his side by using diplomatic means, but this had no impact on other places such as Nalbari, Barama, Bajali etc., where *raij-mels* continued to remain active as before.

Another important movement that took place in a village called Kapla near Lachima in the Sarukhetri mouza of Kamrup district, where a *mouzadar* and a *mandal* were severely assaulted, when they went to collect land revenue. The mouzadar died after a few days later, Following which, seventy five persons were arrested in this connection with the incident. However, an agitated crowd demanded their release. Taking into account the threatening attitude of the crowd, McCabe was compelled to arrive at Lachima with armed forces and arrested another 59 persons, who were confined in a temporary lock-up. Soon, a large number of people gathered in front of the camp, demanding the release of their arrested leaders and refusing to pay revenue. However, McCabe refused to accept the demand of the *rayats* and dispersed the agitated crowd with the threat of fixed bayonets. The tales of district authorities' Taking into account the threatening attitude of the crowd, McCabe was compelled to arrive at Lachima with armed forces and arrested another 59 persons, whom were confined in a temporary lock-up. Soon, a large number of people gathered in front of the camp, demanding the release of their arrested leaders and refused to payment of revenue. But McCabe denied to accept the demands of the *rayats* and disperse the violent *rayats* with the threat of fixed bayonets. The tales of the district authorities' barbarity were still remembered by the inhabitants of the area.

A similar movement, like those in Rangia and Lachima broke out in a place called Patharughat in the Darrang district in January 1894. Here, the *rayats* through their *raij-mels* not only protested against the increased rate of revenue but also resisted those who paid revenue to the government. To deal with the situation, J.D. Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, personally appeared at the spot on 27th January with an armed force. On the following day, around 2,000 people gathered in front of the guest house where Anderson was staying, to lodge their complaints against the enhanced rates of assessment. Anderson ordered them to disperse but the people instead of obeying, the crowd began to throw sticks and clods of earth at him. In response, Anderson ordered the armed forces to open fire, in which fifteen people were killed and many *rayats* were injured.

From these uprisings, the British realized that unless the *raij-mels* were crushed, it would be impossible to maintain the sovereign power in the state. Therefore, they resorted to a ruthless policy with the help of armed forces. However, once the people became aware about of the exploitation under British rule, nothing could stop them. They were prepared for a greater struggle when the opportunity would arise.

Conclusion

It is evident that peasant uprisings in Assam reflected the exploitative nature of British rule. The British introduced several economic policies and imposed various Acts to implement them. All land revenue measures undertaken by the colonial administration were intended to expand the colonial economy, due to which the *rayats* were

severely exploited. In response, the *rayats* expressed their discontent through *raij-mels* which took the form popular of peasant uprisings in various parts of the state. However, the peasant movement in Assam was confined to limited geographical areas, particularly in rural areas, where the peasants resided. At the same time, there was a lack of common ideology, strategy, and programmes, as a result of which, they could not sustain their struggle. As a result the British government was able to crush the movement by using armed forces and diplomacy. Nevertheless, the peasant movement in Assam had a significant impact on the freedom movement in Assam. The peasants became one of the major communities in the region, who contributed greatly to the freedom struggle. The rising middle class, which led the freedom movement in Assam, fully recognized the strength and important role of the peasant community in the movement.

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