



The decades of unrest (1862-1892): Interpreting the special causes of Assam unrest

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(Abstract:

After the outbreak of 1861, there was no outburst of the peasants in Colonial Assam. From 1862 to 1892, for three decades, there was no outburst except a mild unrest in erstwhile Nowgong. It cannot be said that the people of then Assam reconciled to the British rule. Waves of unrest still then blew in their minds silently years after years and culminated later on in the form of series of upheavals in 1893-94. This paper is an honest attempt which seeks to trace out the various causes that precipitated the upheavals of 1893-94. Methodologies that have been applied in this paper are entirely hypothetical, descriptive as well as analytical .)

A critical study of the political history of Assam during the period stretching from 1862 to 1892 will tend us to believe that after 1861, there was no outburst of the peasants except a mild bubble in erstwhile Nowgong of Assam in 1868-69. But that does not mean that they reconciled to the British rule. About three decades elapsed without any notable disturbance, despite of having enormous scope. The three decades (1862-92) provided the main strength to the peasant uprisings of 1893-94 and the freedom struggle in Assam in later period. But in no case, there was a movement in Assam for the freedom of the province from the foreign yoke. It developed in later years.

In fact, there are several reasons behind this type of conspicuous silence of the common people as well as the leaders. In spite of having lots of scope, the peasants and the mass people remained silenced during the period of 1862-92. They only wanted change of their master's outlook and behavior. The people, in general, groaned under economic hardship after 1861 and because of that, they probably could not think of another revolt like 1861. The peasants faced the British might and machinery in 1861, and could not forget that dreadful memory for several decades. They, it seems, never sought its

repetition. Moreover, they most probably, considered their traditional mode of warfare inferior to that of the British and waited for the best time to come. After the mutiny of 1857, there emerged leadership crisis Assam. Had there been charismatic leaders, silence probably would have been broken. There was also lack of well-organized association to lead the masses. Though there was people's assembly to mobilize the peasants, despite that, it failed due to the inapt handling of its leaders, as most of them were illiterate and traditional. Ultimately, such condition gave opportunity to the British to be more obstinate to rule the land. The mass people, on the contrary, had no other options but to accept the rule of the British. But wave of ignition continued to blow in their mind silently. The colonial government failed to understand that people die but their protest never.

Unity of action was not yet imagined and probably because of this, they could not unite against the British and had to maintain silence. Lack of better substitute was also another cause for their silence. The attempted reforms and reorganization of the administration could not eradicate the evils of the government and their satellites whose interest was more of economic exploitation than of improving the lot of the masses or redress of their grievances. Despite of its faults and failures, the masses in general, accepted the British rule not because that they had love for them, but because that they could not expect to have better substitute for it. After 1861, the number of government's force was increased in Assam to cope-up with the situation and it created scare and terror in the minds of the peasants. The government's ever-readiness and ever-preparedness to face any type of situation gave birth crest-fallen in the minds of the peasants.

The unrest blew silently in the minds of the peasants of Assam even after 1861. The dormant and non-dormant both factors were active and alive before 1861 also. The outbreak of 1861 bears the testimony to it. But their vibration and intensity began to augment in unabated manner as the time rolled-on. Ultimately, it invited series of catastrophe with the wings of conflagration in erstwhile Kamrup and Darrang in 1893-94.

The colonial government by raising the revenue demand created terror in the minds of the peasants and in fact, the payment of land revenue was the root of all major social conflicts involving the peasants. The planters, they were the biggest landlords but the revenue paid by them was the lowest. The peasants as they opposed the increased rate of revenue, the planter community instead of giving them support, they rather stretched-out their supporting hands to the government as the increased rate served their purpose. Increased rate, as they planned, would flush-out the traditional agricultural system and make the locals as their laborers in the tea gardens. The government also did not decrease the rate of revenue and rather tried to convince the locals that it would increase the paying capacity of the people. The people of Assam after 1861 understood the real motive of the colonial government behind the ban on the local poppy cultivation. They banned it only for their revenue consideration, not for humanitarian ground at all. Had it been humanitarian, they would not have

sold their own opium to the people of Assam. Up to 1861, Nowgong and her surroundings were under the grip of opium and in course of time, entire Brahmaputra valley including River Island Majuli also came under the influence of opium.

Sudden fall of English agriculture from 1875 onwards may be one of the important causes behind the further revenue maximization in their colonies. Due to sudden fall, catastrophe sets-in in England in the 19th century. Therefore, to restore their economy, they resorted device to augment revenue on land. Massive fiscal pressure due to the maximization of land revenue led to increasing indebtedness in the villages and caused therefore, peasants' flight. Actually, the British colonization was mainly responsible for the poverty of Indian peasants as their exactions was manifested in the growing pauperization of India. The defects of the revenue settlement aroused feelings which often found expression in criminal offences. Subordinate people gained nothing out of land reforms. The conduct of the Cadastral survey was defective. Field measurements were not carefully and systematically tested. Objections of the peasants were hardly discussed.

After the Phulaguri uprising of 1861, the land revenue was increased and doubled in 1868. The Settlement Act of 1870 again doubled the rate of revenue and it was increased again in 1883 and 1893. The colonial government squeezed the people in such a manner that there was no fall of land revenue in spite of having epidemic diseases, like cholera, small pox and fever in 1879-80 in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. In the Settlement of 1883, revenue was raised by about 53 % on the average but in some areas, it was as high as 80 to 100%. During the period between 1866 and 1889, the land revenue had more than quadrupled. The peasants began to reel under the increasing burden of land revenue and it affected the agricultural development for the last three decades of the 19th century.

The Assam Land and Revenue Regulations of 1886 was not welcome by the peasants and landlords as this regulations introduced an elaborate tenancy system which tightened the loopholes and brought all sections under a common code. Great resentment had started in the entire Brahmaputra valley in view of the preparation of this regulations and a public meeting of about 10,000 people at Jorhat on the 2nd June, 1886 had expressed its voices against the measures under the positive role of J.N.Barua. The imposition of tax on income created widespread resentment in the minds of the traders, merchants and the middle class. The government, in addition to that, imposed license tax also for collecting forest products. Agricultural items were also not spared from paying taxes. Moreover, the government brought some revenue free land under assessment. The term of 20 years of revenue free settlement of land with the former kings of Darrang originated in 1859-60, having expired, the entire land was brought under resettlement. Again, the people grazed their cattle freely on the fields of villages but the government brought these lands also under assessment.

The government instead of developing the rudest implements of agriculture, and conditioning and manure of fields for better harvest; they cared for collecting revenue. Moreover, attempt was hardly made to raise embankments for the

protection of crops from the ravages of floods which was of frequent occurrence. In addition to that, the government hardly showed interest for the development of road and transport that led to the agricultural fields. On the contrary, the public funds were diverted for the interest of plantation. The tea producing districts had a better communication system than that of the non-tea producing ones.

The decisive stage of development of capitalism is imperialism and the only motto of capitalism is to build the mountain of profits. The ryots and the laborers are the creators of all wealth used by men. But the British capitalists did not think for the welfare of these sections even at the time of natural calamities. Humanitarianism resulted in many administrative measures to fight famine and control epidemics, but they were only in name. In colonial period, the natural calamities like fire, earthquake, drought, floods and cattle disease aggravated the situation of Assam, especially the condition of peasants became deplorable at that time. By introducing the crop insurance and credit facility system, the colonial government could have given respite to the people of Assam in the time of natural calamities but no such step was seen taken by the government. Rather, the Assam valley emerged more and more as an important area for commercial exploitation because of its growing tea industry, minerals and timbers. It is because of this; the government cast their covetous eyes on the wasteland of Assam and was allergic to the allotment of the same to the local people. The immigration of farmers also created problem for the local farmers. Demand for productivity of food grain increased due to the rise of tea industry and labourers, therefore, required for it. The government relaxed the wasteland rule to encourage immigration of farmers as there was scarcity of local labourers, and they were even settled by the planters on their holdings to produce rice.

By abolishing the paik system, the colonial government did a good service to the people of Assam but that was just an eye-wash. Their brutal and diabolic character came to light through their treatment meted-out to the coolies and Guha terms it as 'the Beasts of a Menagerie.'

The British fiscal policy in Assam was directly linked with their commercial programmes in rest of India. In order to achieve commercial program, they in stages converted Assam in to their colony. Most of the local industries were either abolished or recast and certain new arrangements were introduced. The abrupt change created internal instability and this in turn, led to great social unrest. The colonial rule precipitated the extinction of the village industries gradually and progressively. India was reduced to a position of market for the consumption of goods made in Britain. It was a painful fact that the condition of people became worse under the British rule due to the ruin of village industries, as they acted as safety valve for those dependent on agriculture. Its decline deprived the farmers of their subsidiary occupation and considerably reducing their income and compelling them to take recourse to borrowing.

The commercialization of agriculture kicked-out the barter economy and placed money economy in its place, but the peasantry was traditionally unaccustomed to this new system. The people faced lots of problem due to the introduction of this new system. Currency was not available at that time. Introduction of money as the medium of exchange without substantial increase of currency created problem for them. They had no other alternative either to leave their land or to take loan from the money-lenders. Thus, indebtedness of the peasants began to grow. That the intention of the government behind the introduction of money economy was revenue, people could understand that in later period. If the government showed least interest for the common people, probably grievances against them would have been reduced to some extent. The people under the colonial government got no justice against exploitation and extortion due to discriminatory and biasness of the European judges. The servants of the government forcibly took away the goods of the ryots by ways of violence. The ryots, they sought justice against this but failed as the courts were run by the government judges. The legal system gave fillip to the rich to oppress the poor. Not only that, some of the society even lost their movable and immovable properties in running the cases in the courts. Moreover, sometime people were given heavy penalties in their lesser crime. As a result, sometime peasants' fury burst-out and found expression in criminal offences.

The British after the revolt of 1861 introduced the Indian Penal Code system in Assam abolishing the former judicial system without taking the approval of the local people. In addition to that, the legal procedure was also defective. Construction of all the courts buildings in towns also created problem for the rural people. In addition to that, the people were not acquainted with the *sadar diwani adalat* and *sadar nizamat adalat* which created another problem for them. The number of educational institutions during the colonial period was few, and that too were constellated in the towns only. As a result, poor sections of the society mainly from the villages could not go to the towns to take their education there. Actually, they were kept black-out of the light of education. Taking full advantage of their illiteracy, the village money-lenders mainly the Marwari *mahajans* exploited them in inhuman manner. The role of Christian missionaries was also not encouraging. They gave importance only on conversion. While the people of Assam were suffering from the diseases of different type, the colonial government instead of rendering medical facilities to the victims was seen busy in collecting revenue and encouraging missionaries to proselyte native to Christianity. They distributed pamphlets in Nowgong during the time of Durga puja where it was mentioned that Jesus Christ could heal the victims and the patients from the clutches of fever and natural calamities.

From 1886 to 1892 different associations and the *rayat sabhas* from the Brahmaputra valley took part in the sessions of the Indian National Congress without fail held in Calcutta, Madras, Allahabad, Bombay, Calcutta, Nagpur and Allahabad and placed their various demands to the government. But their participation bore no fruits as the government was least concerned of their demands. Being dissatisfied at this, they did not participate in the further sessions held in 1893

and 1894; and stretched-out their helping hands and minds to the peasants of Assam in their revolts in that years. Dormant and non-dormant, both factors kept the environment of colonial Assam hot and volatile all through-out the year's stretching-from 1862 to 1892. Actually, these three decades prepared the ground reality of the outbreaks of 1893-94. The revolt of 1861 created a vast gap between the ruler and the ruled; and it began to unabated as time rolled on. Suspicion, enmity, disdain and belligerent tendency developed on both sides. The ruler, gradually, started to increase the number of their forces to avert any further revolts in the coming days and created thus a sense of fear in the minds of the restless ryots. The *raij-mels* alias people's assembly also remained silence for some time for the fear of the colonial government. The ruled, on the contrary, developed a deep racial bitterness towards the ruler during this period, and opposed the inferior status that was granted to them. The peasants had to lose their bargaining power after 1861, and the chances of getting their grievances, thus were redressed and removed. Finally, the people organized at grass-root level against the government, and the government also remained stony hard to divide the masses. After 1861, the colonial government learnt that until and unless the voices of the people were crushed and silenced, their existence in Assam would bound to be menaced and jeopardized. They, therefore, became alert and firm to suppress the voices of the people at any cost. The mass people also, on the contrary, prepared themselves against the government but waited for better opportunity to come.

Following the Phulaguri uprising of 1861, the government held enquiries and adopted certain measures to remove the apprehension of the people by taking action on the guilty officers, but did not stop the enhancement of land revenue. The people were firm not to pay the enhanced rate of revenue, on one hand and the government, on the other, was also adamant to collect that at any cost, even by using force if needed. As a result, confrontation and enmity developed. The relation between the ruler and the ruled started deteriorating in Nowgong, Kamrup and Darrang in comparison to the other districts of Assam. Denial to accept the government's verdict gave birth to anguish and enmity in these three districts in later period. The years from 1862 to 1892 may be termed as the years of peasants' unrest and it is proved from their *mels* held in the different districts of Assam, especially, in Kamrup and Darrang. The aggrieved, the Hindus and the Muslims, both met in their *mels* and protested against the increased revenue on land. From the early 1869, the *mels* were frequently held at Patharughat of Mangaldoi sub-division of erstwhile Darrang; and at Gobindapur, Hadira and Bajali in the north of the district of Kamrup. When the year of 1869 was a blessing for the mankind as Mahatma Gandhi was born in that year; the burden of revenue was doubled in Assam in that same year.

The people's assembly of Phulaguri had far reaching impact in the minds of the people of Assam as they were becoming discontented with the fiscal policy of the colonial government. Surprisingly, the authority, instead of paying attention to the impact of the Phulaguri people's assembly, was trying to enhance the rates of revenue even after that. The rates of revenue were doubled in 1869. At the time of making the revenue rate double in 1869, they did not consider even

for once the backward state of agriculture of Assam. The peasants of Patharughat were the first to react it, and the people's assemblies were held at different villages in protest against the enhancement of land revenue. Colonel Comber, the Deputy Commissioner; Driberg, the Sub-Divisional Officer and the District Superintendent of Police, they all rushed to Patharughat. The officers were besieged on the very night by a disorderly mob at Patharughat but fortunately, no extreme measures were resorted to on either side. The officers were said to have been shut in a bungalow at Patharughat. The impact of revenue hike was seen among the peasants of Nowgong also in 1869, as the government ignored their capacity and capability. Against the enhancement of revenue, the peasants of different parts of the erstwhile district of Kamrup were found to have been aggrieved; and as a result of which, the people's assemblies were summoned for the discussion on the issue. The public assemblies were frequently held at Bajali, Hadira and Gobindapur from the early part of 1869. The assemblies decided not to pay the enhanced revenue and also for its remission. Despite the scanty of source materials of the public assemblies, it is said that Mr. Campbell, the Sub-Divisional Officer of Barpeta, received information that a public assembly was held at Gobindapur to protest the augmented rates of land revenue towards the end of January, 1869. Mr. Campbell directed the Police Inspector of Barpeta to enquire instantly about the proceedings of the public assemblies and also to furnish the names of the prominent leaders. The Police Inspector rushed to the post but could not disperse the mob as his party was consisted of a few men with muskets. It is said that the party had to quit the place under the cover of darkness. The Inspector, of course, collected the names of some leaders but failed to forward to the higher authority the details of the public assemblies. Major Agnew, the Officiating Commissioner, expressed his anguish and condemned the Inspector for his failure and directed him to take coercive action for quelling the public assemblies. As a result of the stern action of the government, the public assemblies could not be held regularly. But that did not end the discontent of the peasants, and the practice of holding the public assemblies went on, though not regularly.

In spite of the ignition among the peasantry, the colonial government was pursuing its revenue enhancement policy slowly and gradually. In 1870, the government decided for settlement of all kinds of land, and imposed rents accordingly. Actually, they did this in order to make sure the quantum of revenue collection. The peasants were forced to pay rent for the surplus and fallow lands which they enjoyed revenue free. Thus, there was augmenting resentment against the revenue measures of the alien government. After two decades, in May, 1890, the public assemblies were held again in different tahsil areas of Hajo. The leaders of the people's assemblies decided not to pay rent of land which compelled the Acting Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup to come to Hajo on the 27th May, 1890 probably for pursuing the peasants to pay revenue. The Superintendent of Police also accompanied him. The Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police's arrival at Hajo indicate that the situation was tense there. Babu Uday Chandra Barua, the tahsildar of Hajo was said to have issued the list of defaulters. He was assisted by the village headmen. Barua, the tahsildar, might have been menaced for his

attempt to collect land rent. The Acting Deputy Commissioner on tour, it is said, was assailed, probably his act of mediation which forced the Deputy Commissioner to go to the place of occurrence on the June 7. He was accompanied by an Acting Judge. Anyway, on the June 12, the case was tried and the accused were sentenced to six months imprisonment.

Actually, though there was no occurrence of movements of serious nature during this period (1862-1892), yet cold wave of protest and ignition blew in the minds of the people silently all through-out the years. This period, indeed, prepared the ground-road for the outbreaks which culminated in Kamrup and Darrang in 1893-94.

Key-words:

Conspicuous, crest-fallen, conflagration, maximization, know-how, commercialization , fallow , *tahsil* (an administrative area), *raij-mels*(people's assembly), *mahajan* (money-lenders), *ryots* (tenant farmer), *ryot-sabha* (meeting of tenant farmers), *sadar diwani adalat* (a court of civil and revenue in Mughal and British India) , *sadar nizamat adalat* (criminal court in Mughal and British India)



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