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**Subaltern's Voice-Resistance and Protests**  
**Assessing Prominent Peasant's Upsurge in Colonial Assam**  
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**Abstract**

*Protests or resistance have been an integral part of socio-political history. Reconstruction of the past would have remained incomplete without taking into consideration the account of such protests. More particularly such protests had been the voice of the 'subalterns' the most distressed section of people in the society to seek a dignified position. Colonial period had witnessed many forms of resistance that was either reflected as tribal movement or movement for working class or peasants movements. In fact they form the most crucial phase of colonial history as such protests not only highlighted the grievances of the suffering masses but at the same time threw a challenge towards the colonial policies and maladministration.*

*Gradually these protests were closely associated with the question of 'identity' in the later phase. The more was the rate of exploitation; the intense was the urge to fight for seeking individual identity. Peasants protest in colonial India was marked with strong determination to fight against colonial oppressors as well as the indigenous once like that of the money lenders and rich landlords.*

*Throughout India many peasants protests had taken place. With the onset of national movement and specifically under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi the peasants upsurge reached a different dimension.*

*These protests were made a medium to awaken strong feeling of nationalism. Issues of non-payment of revenue and non-cooperation with the colonial administrators were interconnected with the resistance of the peasants.*

*Even the state of Assam had witnessed various prominent peasants upsurge under colonial rule. Either that was the case in Nowgong, Rangiya or Mangaldai sub division or more particularly the outbreak in the district of Cachar in lower Assam, all had highlighted on the grievances and the burning issues that had led dissention of the cultivating class of people.*

*With this presentation a discussion has been made on peasants protests as the major form of subaltern protest in India during colonial period as well as major outbreak of such protests in Assam simultaneously.*

**Key Word:** *Subalterns, distressed, maladministration, identity, colonial oppressors, burning issues, dissentions.*

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**Objectives of the Study:** Peasants protests or upsurge has been the most crucial phase of colonial period. Such protests had thrown a severe challenge to the colonial administration and their inhuman economic policies. The peasants had formed the worst victims of the colonial oppression and torture.

The presented paper would help in attaining the following objectives:

- 1) The main factors resulting in the grievances of the peasants and the nature of the prominent peasants upsurge in colonial India.
- 2) The emphasis laid on the sudden agricultural transformation that took place in Assam after it was brought under colonial rule.
- 3) A special highlight made on the major peasants outbursts of Nowgong, Rangiya and Mangaldai subdivision in Assam.
- 4) Studying the great Tebhaga movement of Cachar as a peasant outburst with a different colour.
- 5) Finally to critically analyse if the peasants' outbursts of Assam were the mere repercussions of the actual happenings in other parts of India or was there any inter connectivity between these upsurges.

## **Introduction:**

**Peasants Unrest in Colonial India:** The beginning of the colonial period or the British regime in India had brought tremendous changes in every sphere. The new administrative structure along with the new policies and rules had been introduced throughout the nation. But out of all these changes, the total transformation of agricultural sector had been the vital one that had drastically changed the whole scenario

To a great extent this transformation was greatly responsible for peasants unrest and their dissatisfaction which was later on reflected through their resistance. More than ninety percent of the total population in the rural sector solely depended on agriculture for their survival and Indian economy was a major form of agricultural economy. So the changes introduced in this sector instantly effected the cultivating class of people.

The very first change in the agricultural sector was noticed with the introduction of the new land revenue system that had ended individual ownership of land. The permanent settlement, ryotwari and mahalwari settlement were the different revenue system that gave a new definition to the relation that was existing between the cultivating class and the new proprietor of the land. The hike in the rate of the revenue was the direct outcome of

thesenew revenue system introduced by the colonial authority. The colonial policy of initiating the three pattern of land revenue system was strictly based on their motive to earn maximum profit and to gain maximum revenue.

Since the permanent settlement introduced in 1793 kept the rate of revenue totally fixed. So it was later on thought to introduce new pattern of land revenue system. The ryotwari settlement introduced the private or individual ownership of land as well as individual responsibility to pay off the revenue. The rates of revenue were indeed kept quite high. Such sort of sudden transformation had brought catastrophic changes and the worst victims were the cultivating class of people. With the enhancement of revenue, the peasants approached the money lenders for the payment of the dues which further culminated into another story of severe exploitation by the money lending class as well. And besides that the landlords or the zamindars were already there who acted as the agents of the British in colonial India. Colonial authority had exploited the poor peasants in the name of revenue collections. These factors had been the main contributory causes that had ultimately led to peasants unrest and frequent peasants protests throughout the country. The main targets were the colonial oppressors, the money lenders and the landlords as the three of them were equally responsible for the suffering and plight of the peasants.

Besides these, another chief reason resulting in the extreme dissatisfaction of the peasants class was the pressure put on them for growing certain crops like that of jute, cotton and more specifically indigo. In many cases when the peasants refused to accept such orders, they were subjected to extreme torture.

The indigo Revolt of 1775-76 had reflected the discontent of the peasants on the issue of growing indigo on the agricultural plot. So it will not be out of place to mention that the peasants unrest in colonial India surrounded the issue of collection of revenue at very high rates, forcing them to grow certain specified crops with the usual oppression of the landlords and the money lenders. The later half of 18th century witnessed outbreak like that of the Pabna outburst of 1873 in East Bengal (undivided Bengal) and the Deccan Riots of 1875 that had mainly targeted the rich land lords and the influential money lending class of people respectively. With the beginning of the national movement, the peasants upsurge was intensified to a great extent and that was inter connected with the issue of attaining 'identity' in the society besides fulfilling the other demand of the peasants. The leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had given a different colour to the peasants protests. The Champaran Satyagrah of 1917, the Kheda movement of 1918 and the Bardoli Satyagrah of 1927-28 all had reflected the issue of forced indigo cultivation and the collection of enhanced rate of revenue which had compelled the peasants to walk on the path of agitation. The more was the oppression of the peasants, the intense was the feeling to attain a dignified status in the society.

In the state of Assam such sort of peasants upsurge had taken place owing to different circumstances during the colonial period. Although such upsurge were not only the mere repercussion of the happenings in the other parts of India.

The mal administration and the wrong policies of the colonial authorities bringing catastrophic transformation within the state had resulted in such outbursts. Developments in Nowgong, Rangiya, Mangaldai Sub division and in the district of Cachar in Assam had been the outward expression of the grievances of the cultivating class of people under different conditions.

**Subaltern's Voice - Peasant's Upsurge in Assam During Colonial Period:** The colonial rule and the total transformation of the socio-economic and political sphere had culminated into a lot of dissensions among the common masses. India had been an witness to all those protests or resistance through which the dissatisfaction of people towards colonial rule and their policies were reflected. The state of Assam had also experienced similar outburst. After the establishment of the colonial rule over Assam, great changes were brought within the economic structure under the new colonial administrative structure. And these changes determined the future economic policies to a great extent. Assam was brought under 'ryotwari settlement' through which a direct link was established between the peasants and the colonial authority. The responsibility to collect the revenue remained within the control of the colonial administrators. The upsurge or the peasants unrest that was noticed in certain parts of Assam were the direct result of all these instant transformations only.

Major peasants outburst had prominently taken place in Nowgong, Rangiya and Mangaldai subdivision of Assam.

The outburst in Phulaguri area of Nowgong had taken place in 1861 and that is more famous in the historical pages as Phulaguri uprising. Nowgong district was very rich in the cultivation of poppy that was later on used for the production of opium. It will not be out of place to mention that the state of Assam was found to have a great market for opium which was consumed locally and this demand for opium had made the cultivation of poppy immensely profitable for the indigenous peasants.

But in 1861 ban was imposed on this cultivation of poppy which had instant adversely effected the peasants of Nowgong. Not only ban but additional taxes were imposed on the cultivation of pan and betelnut in the area. The outcome of these restrictions was the spontaneous outburst of the peasants in the area surrounding Phulaguri. Mostly tribal peasants of Lalung community were involved with the outburst as they were the worst effected victims of the colonial policies.

The later phase of the outburst was associated with violent protests which had culminated into the murder of British official Lieutenant Singer.

Even though the voice of the protesting peasants was suppressed but the Phulaguri uprising had made a deep impact and had given the courage to the cultivators to fight for their rights.

For the second time similar kind of violent protest was witnessed in the year 1893-94. The sudden enhancement of land revenue after 1892 had culminated into these outbursts. Masses of Kamrup and Central Assam organised themselves for pitched battle. Owing to these circumstances Rangiya Bazar was looted on 24th Dec, 1893. Cultivators this time had not only demanded reduction of the land revenue but they simply wanted to move on the path of non-cooperation and strongly denied the payment of the revenue.

The most violent incident took place at Patharughat in Mangaldai subdivision of Assam on 28th Jan, 1894 and a hard scuffle took place between the agitating farmers and the colonial force. In order to suppress the outburst, colonial administrators used strong force and finally peasant's voice was suppressed. But this will not be an exaggerated statement that even though the agitation was dealt with a very hard hand, the spirit of the protesting peasants could not be hidden that had dared to challenge the colonial policies.

**Tebhaga Movement of Cachar - How much Subaltern was the Movement:** Moving a little bit away from the usual peasants protests in which mostly they had targeted the colonial policies and their maladministration, there was yet another pattern of upsurge through which the peasants targeted the indigenous oppressors like that of the money lenders or the rich zamindars.

The outbreak of the Tebhaga Movement was the reflection of the grievances of the peasants and the first attempt made to oppose the inhuman exploitation of the landlords or zamindars. Although the beginning was made from the province of Bengal but a very strong repercussion of that Tebhaga Movement of Bengal was felt in the district of Cachar in lower Assam as well. The main slogan of the outburst surrounded the issue of keeping two-third of the total agricultural produce as the share of the peasants and the remaining one-third should be given as the share of the landlords. Specifically commenting on the 'Tebhaga Movement' indeed it was yet another voice of the 'subaltern class'-the peasants. The only difference was that unlike the other previous outbursts the tebhaga agitators had been targeting the indigenous oppressors and not colonial ones.

The movement had created a platform for strongly highlighting the grievances of the cultivators.

'Subalternity' speaks off the rights of the masses - those masses who are taken as the most neglected, distressed and ignored faction of the society. And the peasants class formed a part of that distressed faction of the society.

Although in most of the cases the outburst of the peasants had been dealt with a very strong hand but that cannot minimize the overall impact of such outbursts which had created a strong foundation for raising voice against exploitation and wrong policies.

**Conclusion:** While summing up the overall conclusion of the study, it can be stated without any doubts that the 'subalterns' had their own voice, their individual identity in the society. Their fight against the colonial injustice was not merely restricted within the fulfillment of their demands but beyond that they wished to acquire a dignified position for themselves in the society. It was truly stated by Ranajit Guha that "the exploitation done by the privileged section of the society made them more conscious of their status."

When major peasants protests took place in the state of Assam, the issue was not only kept within the fulfillment of the demands of the cultivating class, but it was more associated with the creation of an 'identity'.

The peasants protests of Phulaguri and Patharughat had given an expression to the suppressed emotion of the peasants. Through these outbursts the power of 'rajmels' or in other words the popular public assembly of the Assamese society was reflected and viewed from a different perspective. Such assemblies took the crucial decisions for the non-payment of revenue and many more. Open challenge was thrown to the colonial policies and mal administration only through public voice and that voice was indeed the voice of the peasants only. As far as the peasant protest in lower Assam in the district of Cachar was concerned, it was more against the oppression of the indigenous exploitations and for the first time it was reflected through the tebhaga movement of 1946 that had mainly targeted the rich landlords in a specific way.

Peasants protest indeed form the most crucial part of the colonial period. It was an unbeaten struggle that could never hide out the undying spirit of the cultivators.

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