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The First Peasant Uprising in Colonial Assam: Phulaguri Dhawa

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Abstract:

The establishment of British rule in India and their political and economic policy impoverished the economic condition of the common people and the peasantry which greatly agitated them against Colonial rule. So as protest, people in different parts of India rose in revolt against the British policies. The agrarian uprisings became an important feature of the Colonial India during the 19th Century C.E. Although the Revolt of 1857 proved to be a failure in the upcoming years it inspired the people and gradually they became conscious about the exploiting nature of the British Government. In Assam also the peasantry was concerned about the constant increase of land revenue and the number of taxes which were imposed on them. So in the later part of the 19th century a series of agrarian uprisings took place in various parts of Assam. Local peasants under the leadership of Rajmels (people's assembly) assembled to discuss about their grievances due to the British economic policy. With the growing popularity of the Rajmels number of the participants increased and later on these peasants revolted against the unjust economic policy of the British. In 1861 the peasants of the Phulaguri area, Nowgaon resorted to revolt against the British taxation system. This was the first peasant uprising in the Colonial Assam against the British and became popularly known as Phulaguri Dhawa. An attempt has been made in this paper to analyses how the new revenue policy of the British paved the way for the Phulaguri peasant uprising of 1861.

Keywords: Revenue, agrarian, rajmel, colonial, economic exploitation.

Introduction: After the Revolt of 1857, the British Home Government declared the Queen's Proclamation in 1858 by which they transferred the administration of the British Indian from the hands of the British East India Company to the British Crown to satisfy the people of India. However, this change of administration did not change the character of the British administration. British administrative changes and economic policy after the revolt greatly dissatisfies the local people. To meet the monetary deficit caused by the revolt of

1857, the government increased the rate of land revenue and imposed other additional new taxes on the common people. It unfavorably affected the rural population and peasantry in different parts of India staged a series of protests against the heavy taxation and oppressive economic exploitation. These protests took the form of localised revolts in various regions of India like the Indigo revolt in Bengal, the Mappila uprising in Malabar etc and all these uprisings reflected the discontentment and grievances of the peasant community. The peasants of all regions of India resorted to revolt against the Colonial exploitation and also against the oppression of the moneylenders and landlords. But in Assam, the peasant community revolted only against the British Government. After 1826 Assam gradually became a part of the British Indian territory and they introduced the British system of administration here and started to taxes from the people. However, the revenue collected from Assam could not support the cost of administration of the State. So to cater to the cost of the administration British authority imposed various taxes on the people which were completely new to them and took steps to increase the land revenue as much as possible. This policy of levies caused great trouble to the local peasants who protested against it. The Phulaguri peasant uprising of 1861 in Nowgaon took place in the aftermath of a series of new taxation measures introduced by the British Government.

Objective of the paper: The following are the main objectives of this paper-

- a) To highlight the British revenue policy in Assam.
- b) To study about the developments of the Phulaguri peasant uprising in the Nowgong district of Assam under the light of the British revenue policy that agitated the people of the region.

Methodology: The present study is based on secondary data; information is collected from secondary sources like books, journals and e-sources.

Descriptive and analytical methods have been used in the preparation of this paper.

Discussion: The nature of British Colonial exploitation did not change after the Revolt of 1857. Instead, it increased even more after the transfer of power to the British Crown. After the transfer of power Indians were in hopes that their miseries would be ended, but their hopes and aspirations were shattered when the British government decided to increase the rates of land revenue. To fill up the financial deficit caused by the Revolt of 1857, the Government launched a new economic policy to enforce strict fiscal discipline. The Government extracted money from the Indians through increased land revenue and the rate of land revenue in some areas drastically increased to reach up to hundred per cent between 1854 -1870 (Kalita . 88)¹. Under the new economic policy, the British Government introduced stamp duty, income tax, import tariff, and excise duties in British India. Assam as a part of British India also came under the new economic policy. As the income produced in Assam was not sufficient enough to meet the cost of expenditure of the administration, hence British Government imposed heavy taxation on Assam and Assam in a way came under the grip of British economic exploitation.

The introduction of British rule in Assam brings a lot of administrative and political changes in Assam. At first, the general people welcomed the British rule with open hands hoping that their sufferings would be ended with the new administration. With the setting up of the new administration initially, they did not bring any drastic changes but simply replaced the personal service to the State (*Paik* system) with a poll tax of Rs 3.00 per *paik* per annum. But the people of Assam were not well versed with the monetary system and found it very difficult. Soon British Government abolished this system and introduced the land revenue system in the Brahmaputra Valley at a low rate. But after revenue reforms of 1832-1833 the rate of revenue increased enormously day by day. Gradually during the tenure of Jenkins rent free grants were classified under various categories and were also made taxable. Thus the peasantry was under the huge burden of taxation improvised their condition. After the transformation of power to the British Crown in 1858 the condition even worsened. The authority was in huge need of money to meet the fiscal deficit caused by the Revolt of 1857. In the year 1861 British introduced the income tax system in India and in the following year, Assam also came under its fold. In addition in 1858 stamp duty and import tariffs were already imposed here and excluding the tribal areas excise duties were collected in all the Sadar stations of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong districts. The British Government also started to collect more revenue by extraction off gold, mining areas and fishing branches in Assam. Fishermen, goldsmiths and Moria community had to pay income tax. Cutting of timber and reed and using of pasture fields were also made taxable (Baruah. 500)². Besides the new opium policy of the Government is another huge burden on the peasantry.

The Phulaguri Peasant Uprising (1861): The peasant uprising of 1861 which took place at Phulaguri in Nowgaon District was the first peasant uprising of Assam against the British economic policy. However, the ban on opium (a heavy - scented addicted drug) cultivation locally by the British Government was another major cause of this uprising. Towards the end of the Ahom rule in Assam, opium consumption became very popular among the common people and hence they started to cultivate poppy (opium) on their *bari mati* (garden land) and *chapari mati* (clay soil) or consumption and also to meet the shortage of money. The British Government took notice of the opium consumption and cultivation in Assam and attracted to it as another source of revenue collection. From the year 1851-1852 British Government started the trade of *abkari* opium in Assam and continued it till the first half of the 20th Century C.E. Several other private concerns also started their opium cultivation and trade in Assam and they appealed to the British to increase the land revenue, so that peasants unable to pay land revenue and would come to their field (Baruah. 501)³. Gradually some planters faced the problem of inadequate labour in their fields and they believed that it was due to the boundless consumption of opium that made the local people lazy and indifferent to the work. They even demanded the Government to put a ban on poppy cultivation and increase the rate of land revenue. So, the British Government who by this time already established their possession over the opium trade, to make it more

profitable for them banned the cultivation of poppy in 1860 to ensure that it was not cultivated locally.

The ban on poppy cultivation greatly dissatisfied the Tribal population particularly the Tiwa (Lalungs) and the Kachari communities living in the Phulaguri area of the Nowgaon District. There was a tradition of Poppy cultivation in the Phulaguri area and it was one of the largest opium-producing areas in Assam. For the tribal community, opium was the prime means of livelihood. They also believed that opium provided longevity and busted the immune system (Bhuyan and Bhuyan. 98)⁴. Therefore this decision of the Governments hurt the traditional sentiment of the Tribal people. The situation became worse when rumours spread among the people that the Government planned to impose additional taxes on the houses, *baris* and cultivation of *pan* and *tamul* (betel vine and areca nut) (Goswami. 222)⁵. Of course, the British Government did not issue any official notification concerning this matter, but they became aware of this issue. So they decided to protest against the government's decision under the leadership of *raijmel* (people's assembly) and expressed their strong resentment.

The decision of the Government severely affected the already aggravated economic condition of the poor peasantry of Assam in general and Nowgaon in particular. To protest and express their grievances against the Government's decision to ban poppy cultivation and taxation on the areca nut and betel vine the Tiwa population lived in the Phulaguri about 12 kilometers from Nowgaon in the month of September 1861 around 1500 peasants proceeded to the Sadar Court of Nowgaon (Baruah. 501)⁶. The then Deputy Commissioner of Nowgaon Lieutenant Herbert Sconce did not listen to the complaints of the people and misbehaved with them. After about one month the peasants once again tried to place their demands of withdrawing the prohibition of poppy cultivation and other oppressive taxes before the authority. But this time also the authorities did not respond to their demands, they decided not to pay the taxes and they would have been levied and assembled under *raijmels* to decide against the Government policies. *Raijmel* is one of the important features of the Colonial Assamese society. After the Revolt of 1857 *raijmels* assemble where people used to gather under the guidance of the elders of the villages constantly for the common interest. 'On 15th of October 1861 the disappointed peasants of the Phulaguri area convened a *raijmel* for five days to enable the peasants of the far off areas to participate in it' (Baruah. 501-502)⁷. The *raijmel* of the Phulaguri area in 1861 served as a common platform for the peasants and prepared the ground for their protest against the economic policy of the British Government. On the first day, thousands of peasants assembled in the *raijmel* and most of them were armed with *lathis* (bamboo sticks). Each consecutive day number of peasants' participation in the *raijmel* was increasing. So the Deputy Commissioner of the Nowgaon Herbert Sconce sent a police force to the spot to look after the situation and mobilised the crowd, but the situation remained unchanged. At this, the Deputy Commissioner dispatched the Assistant Commissioner Lieutenant Singer along with a police force to handle the whole situation. Lt. Singer arrived at the scene with a small police force and found a gathering of about three thousand armed with *lathis* (Barpujari. 14)⁸. As a Government official upon

arriving at the spot first Singer tried to resolve the issue by negotiating with the peasants and holding talks with some of the protesting peasants. Jati Kalita, a leader of the protesting peasants complained to Singer that the recently imposed tax was irrelevant and had no practical significance and also complained about the Government's negligence to their interests (Baruah. 502)⁹. But Singer expressed a negative attitude towards the peasant demands and ordered them to leave the spot and go home. But the peasants insisted on staying there until they got a positive reply from the Government. This situation became increasingly tense and Singer became agitated with the constant protest peasants and by applying force tried to drive them away from the ground and snatched away the *lathis* of the peasants. As a result clash broke out between the police and the assembled peasants when an unfortunate event took place where someone from the agitated peasants thrust the *lathi* on the head of Lieutenant Singer and he fell down and finally was beaten to death by some of the armed peasantry and thrown his body into the Kalang River (Goswami. 222)¹⁰. Upon this, the anxious police force fled from the scene (Baruah. 502)¹¹. Tumba Lalung, Kati Lalung, Bhugbar Lalung, Moni Koch, Kalyan Koch, Kali Deka, Dodhi Lalung, Bahu Kaibortta, Jati Kalita were directly involved in the clash with the British police force (Hussain. 508)¹². The British Government could not tolerate the violent action of the peasants and decided to creak down them with stern measures. Henry Hopkins, the Commissioner of Assam, was given the responsibility of suppressing the peasant uprising of Phulaguri. Accordingly, under the order of Hopkins, they dispatched the Assam Light Infantry to the scene; firing took place and ultimately they were able to suppress the uprising with harsh hands with the help of the Assam Light Infantry and law and orders were restored (Barpujari. 14)¹³. Thirty- nine peasants lost their lives and many more were injured in the clash between the British force and the peasants (Kalita. 97)¹⁴. Forty-one peasants were arrested under the charge of Singer's murder case and the main culprits were punished with death sentences and others were imprisoned. This peasant uprising is still recalled by the people of Assam as the Phulaguri Dhawa or the Battle of Phulaguri.

Findings: The Phulaguri Uprising in the Nowgaon District of Assam was attributed to the discontent of the peasants with the ban on Poppy cultivation and the imposition of some other additional taxes besides the already existing taxes which was a huge burden on the impoverished peasantry.

The uprising was confined to a specific geographical and was only limited to the Tiwa and Kachari communities of the Phulaguri. This uprising did not have continuous organization against the British authority.

Raijmel, the popular assembly of the common people played an important role in the uprising through which peasants released their grievances. The Phulaguri uprising did not have any ideology, firm leadership or organized programme. Hence, the British authority found it easy to suppress the uprising.

Conclusion: The Phulaguri Uprising was the first in Assam and its chief aim was to deter the British Government from imposing unpleasant additional taxes and to check on the ban

on poppy cultivation. Earlier peasants in Assam did not dare to protest against the Colonial exploitation. Of course, this uprising was neither an organized one nor a violent disturbance caused by the dissatisfaction of the Tiwa and Kachari peasants. It was the culmination of the grievances caused by the fiscal measures of the British. However, it has significance in the history of Assam that inaugurated a new era of peasant activities and paved the way for the later peasant or agrarian uprising in Assam.

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