

Agrarian system with special reference to the outbreaks of Assam (1893-94): An analytical discourse

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ABSTRACT:

The new agrarian structure initiated by the British administration did not generate any structural development; rather it accelerated the process of pauperization and stagnation leading to widespread discontent and irritation among the masses which was ultimately manifested in the outbreaks of 1861 and 1893-94. How did the peasants alias masses fall easy prey because of reflection and refraction of this policy, attempts has been made to address all these through this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Initially, in the wake of turmoil and disturbances, protracted and prolong wars, repeated acts of oppression, famine and pestilence; the transition to the British rule in Assam was welcomed with much hopes, assurances and enthusiasm. But all hopes and assurances were, however belied as soon as the colonial rulers introduced substantial changes in agrarian structure. The introduction of new agrarian system did not generate any structural development, rather precipitated the process of pauperization and stagnation. The dreadful result of such policies developed within two or three decades since its inception. Krishna Sarma vehemently criticized the agrarian policy of the Colonial Government by depicting the deplorable condition of the peasants. The conduct of the cadastral survey was so erroneous that they were always confronted with numerous objections. The measurements of the fields of each *mauza* were not carefully and systematically tested as Moffat Mills reported in 1853. Objections of the peasants were hardly discussed and less examined. Moreover, surveys were not free from errors.

The Ahom regime was halcyon days for the peasants of Assam as they had to pay less revenue during this time than the colonial period. The rent realization mode was modified from personal to territorial basis. Historically for India's peasants, land is the hope and glory of the rural people. By augmenting the incidence of revenue, the alien government wounded the feelings of the peasants. Naturally enough, the Colonial Government cared more for revenue than for the material amelioration of the masses which ultimately found manifestation in criminal offences.

The revenue policy of the government dissatisfied the people of Assam. In addition to the arbitrary and unjust settlement, classification of land was neither scientific nor based on actual productivity of the soil. Formerly, the ryots were the owners of the land and now, they could be ejected from there on the breach of any of the conditions of lease. They could previously transfer their land; now required permission. Former single *patta* had been multiplied during the British regime for which the farmers had to bear extra stump duty.

The government classified and augmented the rate of revenue on land at a time when productivity of the land was considerably declining. Even the rate of revenue was not reduced at the time of fall of prices of paddy. With every assessment and survey, the alien rulers used to augment the rate of revenue without caring for low productivity and yielding.

The demand of government went on accumulating huge arrears, vast areas of land were thrown out of cultivation and ryots were exposed to the rapacity of the revenue officials whose extortion had, at that time, became proverbial.

The nature of the British exactions was manifested in the growing pauperization of India. Consequently, tenants suffered lot under the exactions of landlords, *mauzadars* and *Choudhuries* who were fully guarded by the machinery of the state. Moreover, the arbitrary confiscation of huge produce of the peasants was the root of all major social conflicts involving the peasants. Prohibitory order of poppy cultivation in 1860-61 shattered the domestic economy of the tribal people of Nowgong. Opium policy, ever increasing land revenue and the tea plantation industry -were three major sources of colonial exploitation in Assam during the British regime. For imposition of new taxes like stump duty, license fee for realizing forest products, grazing fee grazing cattle invited widespread discontent against the colonial government.

The Colonial Government in the name of waste land rules engulfed those lands which were full of forest. They exported valuable woods to Britain and thus, continued their holocaust of forest destruction inviting catastrophe to agriculture viz. droughts, soil erosion and floods. The indigenous people did not get benefits from the wasteland rules. These rules were made to boost plantation sector in Assam. Local cultivators got nothing from these rules; rather their lands were sold as wasteland to tea companies.

The government encouraged migration to remove the shortage of labour in their plantation industries. These migratory people, they first came in small numbers but later on in large proportion including their children and families which found expression in the growing population pressure on the land.

By eradicating the *paik* system in Assam, the Colonial Government did a yeoman service to the people of Assam. But they did it only because of their own interest. High classes like aristocrats and nobilities, members of royal families did not like its eradication as its eradication degraded their status hitherto enjoyed in the society.

The government exploited the masses by the systematic maximization of revenue. It was like one way traffic, nothing was done in return to develop the condition of agriculture. The government did not provide the people with better facility and improved means of cultivating their lands. Even their measures to prevent natural calamities were not satisfactory. The government was busy in revenue collection as and when masses were hammered by frequent floods and droughts. The government again introduced money economy not for the welfare of the masses but just to meet their revenue demands. The peasantry traditionally unaccustomed to any kind of money taxation and now constantly in dread of the enhancement of land revenue and imposition of new taxes kept up the smoldering fire of protest and disdain against the Raj. For most of the peasants, commercialization of agriculture and development of money economy was just like an anathema. They did not like this system and rather sought to go back to their former traditional barter system. Lack of adequate currency and payment of revenue in cash created another problem for them. Money-lenders finally came to their rescue and thus, fell in their cobwebs. They had to lose their agricultural lands, household properties and even the ornaments and utensils at the hands of the money-lenders. Thus, the incidence of rural indebtedness continued to mount and ultimately, it engulfed the entire regions. There were no hopes of respite from this.

Exploitation and extirpation continued in unabated manner. The locals, they had to sell their raw materials to the agents of the government at a very cheap rate which had been exported to Britain and been imported again to Assam as finished goods. These finished goods manufactured in Britain flooded the markets of Assam and due to the better quality and cheap prices; the British products sounded the death bell of the local products resulting the decline of the indigenous industries of Assam. Decline of the indigenous industries put additional pressure on agricultural lands resulting further fragmentation of lands. Due to such policy of the Colonial Government, some became labourers and some slaves in the land.

The economic condition of almost all sections of the peasantry under such condition started deteriorating during the second half of the 19th century. Ultimately, such agrarian conditions led to widespread discontent and ignition among the masses which was finally manifested in the outbreaks of 1861 and 1893-94.

According to Karna, the land rights of the farmers had not assumed any permanent character as the agrarian scene in the Brahmaputra valley was still in flux. The 1870 Settlement Rules may be taken as the starting point of fixed and authentic land rights for the Assamese cultivators. But the 1870 Settlement Rules were kept in abeyance for almost more than a decade and were implemented only in 1883 after substantial modifications giving rise to a general system of decennial settlement for the entire Brahmaputra valley. Finally, basic principles of these rules were incorporated in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886. Under this, a set of Settlement Rules was prepared in 1887. The cadastral survey in Assam was carried out in 1883-1893 and with the help of this survey, maps and land records were systematically prepared and incorrect measurements and under classification of plots of lands were rectified which helped the government to augment the rate of revenue to an exorbitant level.

Under the reassessment, as Guha says, the revised rates in the Brahmaputra valley was initially an enhancement of 53 percent on the average but in many areas it was as high as 70 to 100 percent. Such enhancement rate of land revenue led to widespread dissatisfaction and resentment among the people of Kamrup and Darrang districts of the Brahmaputra valley in 1893-94. It remains expressed here that compared to the uprisings of 1861, the no-rent agitation of 1893-94 was more organized and businesslike, as Karna compares. It was not a sudden and sporadic outburst in which people were involved. Had the Colonial Government designed their agrarian system for the good and wellbeing of the mass people of Assam, probably the outbreaks of 1893-94 could have been averted. But, their agrarian system pauperized the masses who finally resorted to the path of violence against the government towards the close of the 19th century.

Glossary:

mauza (a fiscal unit), *mauzadar* (in charge of a mauza),
choudhries (a revenue officer in charge of a purganah),
paik (an Assamese ryot under the Ahom king), *raj* (country),
patta (a lease deed)

Key-words:

Pauperization, pestilence, cadastral, yielding, cobwebs, commercialization,
Indebted-ness, fragmentation, smoldering

Notes & References:

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