

Peasant Uprisings and Middle Class Hegemony : The case of Assam

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The talk of peasant uprisings in terms of middle class hegemony may sound highly ambiguous and appear to be an attempt at juggling with contradictory ideas. But in the context of developments in the North Eastern region, particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, it is neither ambiguous nor jugglery in contradictory ideas to relate the hegemonic position of the middle class to various processes of change in the social and economic life of the society. As we have shown elsewhere,¹ the Assamese middle class, because of the absence of other dominant classes, stood forth as the most dominant class in Assamese society from the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So all pervading was its influence that the value premises of the Assamese middle class came to be accepted as the value premise of the entire Assamese society. We know that in the "various phases of the development of a society a particular class always comes to hold the dominant position in the society. Usually it is the ruling classes that play this role, but sometimes in exceptional circumstances even a non-ruling class might rise to this dominant position and maintain a hegemony over the society. The importance of the Assamese middle class also stems from the fact that though not a ruling class during the colonial period and even after independence, yet it was able to maintain a dominance, both ideologically and otherwise, over the Assamese society." This domination of the middle class has therefore coloured the processes of change in Assam because middle class ideology is progressive on the one hand but can be very reactionary and conservative on the other.³ This dual character of middle class ideology is well reflected in the very noticeable changes that underwent peasant uprisings in Assam after the emergence of the Assamese middle class, because the Assamese peasantry was also not able to remain outside the sphere of influence of the ideas of the hegemonic class.⁴

There are enough narrative accounts of peasant uprisings in Assam, as also of anti-British uprisings in N.E. India like those

of U Tirot Singh in the Khasi Hills, of Sonaram Sangma in the Garo Hills in early twentieth century, and of the Jaintia rebellions of the 1860s⁵. However, works are yet to emerge which deal exhaustively with the nature of these revolts from a class perspective, analysing the role of traditional leaders and later of the leaders from newly emerging social forces. When such studies emerge then perhaps a clearer history of peasant struggles in N.E. India will take shape. Coming to the specific case of peasant movements in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, there is enough data at hand which can be used to study the general course and nature of these movements. From all the accounts available one factor stands out very clearly that is the fact of the militancy of the Assamese peasantry. The history of such sporadic, spontaneous upheavals can perhaps be dated back to the mid eighteenth century when the Moamaria uprising took place. This was a popular uprising of a large section of the Assamese peasantry against the Ahom monarchy, although the uprising came in the garb of a religious upheaval. This was an all out fray with no room for compromises, and victory or defeat had to be its end. Moving on to the colonial period there were the early anti-British uprisings which could be called the restorative type as categorised by Kathleen Gough,⁶ when under the leadership of disposed Ahom princes and nobles there was an attempt at driving out the British and reverting to the previous system of Government. Into this category would fall such uprisings like those led by Gomdhar Konwar in Assam, and U Tirot Singh in the Khasi Hills.⁷ These early uprisings were suppressed with strong-arm tactics by the British Government, but the simmering discontent continued and even increased as British economic policies, particularly land revenue policies, were introduced. As land revenue policies were enhanced time and again and a number of new taxes (like income tax, hearth tax etc.) were introduced,⁸ the "mass people found that these measures had badly shattered their domestic economy."⁹ The result was a flare up of the long simmering discontent which resulted in violent uprisings at Phulaguri in Nowgong district in 1861. "In order to represent their grievances personally, about one thousand ryots gathered at the *Sadar* court and some of them are reported to have forced their way into the room where the Deputy Commissioner was transacting his business."¹⁰ Then under the leadership of the *gaonburas* and leading *ryots* it was decided to hold a *mel* for 5 days so that *ryots* from far off villages could also attend it. The *ryots* came in thousands armed with lathis. They even overpowered

a daroga who had arrested some of their leaders and got them released. The *ryots* were ready to fight it out with the state, and they even beat to death the Assistant Commissioner not fearing the consequences of such an act. It was only the timely arrival of the police and military which stopped the *Phulagurir Dhawa* from becoming a widespread conflagration, because even with their bows and arrows they were ready to fight the state forces. In the 1860s too therefore we find that the Assamese peasantry under the leadership of their traditional leaders like *Gaonburas* and *Dolois* were ready to get their grievances redressed by violently attacking the State machinery¹¹ and the idea of a compromise formula played no part in their thinking. The next peasant uprisings in Assam occurred in 1893-94, but interestingly these uprisings, unlike the earlier uprisings had two important features. First, the period of violence was preceded by a phase of petitioning the government for a redressal of their grievances, and secondly, there were two sets of leaders - the traditional leadership of the *Raijmels* and a new set of leaders who would rather take a constitutional path of agitation and thus create the tendency towards compromise in a section of the peasantry. It is also pertinent to note at this point that the *Raijmels* of 1893-94 marked the end of the spontaneous militant uprisings of the peasantry which had been the significant feature of peasant uprisings in Assam since the mid 18th century.

From the end of the 19th century the nature of peasant movements began to change. The place of *Raijmels* was taken by *Ryot Sabhas*, and under the leadership of the *Ryot Sabhas* nothing like *Phulagurir Dhawa* and *Patharughatar Ron* ever happened in Assam again. It is in this respect that the question of middle class hegemony emerges. In the 1860s the middle class had not emerged in Assam but by the end of the 19th century this class had emerged as a class and had begun to make its influence felt in every sphere of social activity in Assam. Thus middle class ideas and values began to permeate all levels of Assamese society. The newly emerged middle class's role as the vanguard of the Assamese society could be seen from the last years of the 1880s. There had been revenue enhancements and levying of numerous taxes in Assam before the 1880s. But at that time either the peasants had kept low accepting their miseries as their fate or had broken out in rebellion as in 1861. When in 1886 new land laws were introduced into Assam regarding land tenures and *patta* distribution, *mels* of the people were called and from these *mels* petitions were sent

to the government to reconsider the new land laws.¹² Then again in 1893 when land revenue was enhanced, very well argued memorials were sent in the names of ryots, not only to the Chief Commissioner of Assam but also to the Viceroy, urging the Government to lower the rates of assessment. In the given condition of educational development in Assam in the 1890s it could not be expected that the ryots could write out such well argued petition and memorandum. This had to be done by people who were well versed in the art of writing petition and memorials and in fact, a memorial of the Tezpur ryot association of 1892 shows that it was drawn up by pleaders like Lambodar Barha and other educated office Babus like Babu Lakshmi Kanta Barkakati and Manikanta Barha. Such people formed a constituent of the newly emerging middle class in Assam.¹³ This middle class, in keeping with general middle class ideology, had an 'ideological aspect strongly tied not to the radical transformation of society'¹⁴ but to gradual reform. Therefore when the middle class got interested in peasant affairs, for genuine as well as selfish reasons of its class promotion, a change came in the nature of peasant organisations also. The *Raijmels* were institutions where the peasants were the most important participating unit. But after 1894 the place of *Raijmels* was taken by the *Ryot Sabhas* which were led and organised by the nascent Assamese Middle class. These *Sabhas* were more conducive to the ideas of constitutional form of agitations. In the *Raijmels* the peasants were more important than the leaders in the sense that the main force of the peasant movement was provided by the peasants and at certain stages the leadership had to fall behind. But in the *Ryot Sabhas* the leadership was more important and the peasants rarely went ahead of the leaders. The *Ryot Sabhas* thus could rarely be as militant as the *Raijmels* were, because the leadership of the *Ryot Sabhas* was in the hands of a group who believed in moderate politics and constitutional agitation, and it is this new middle class leadership's influence which changed the whole nature of peasant uprisings in Assam.

It is therefore not out of place to talk of middle class hegemony in the context of peasant uprisings in Assam, since it is because of this dominating force that moderate, reformist ideas began to enter the sphere of peasant organisations also. An institution like the *Raijmel* which stood for radical movements could not exist within the gamut of middle class ideas and beliefs. Thus as the Assamese middle class began to emerge and gradually established itself as the most dominant class in Assamese society we see not only a

change in the leadership of peasant movements, but also a change in the nature of the movements. From the path of violent upheavals the peasantry gradually began to toe the line that its middle class leaders began to tread and thus in the twentieth century we see that before and after independence, even in violence the peasantry could go only to that point where class interests of its leaders were not harmed or endangered. The most important fact however is that with the ascendance to hegemony of the Assamese middle class the peasantry lost its own leadership and initiative which it had earlier, and totally accepted the leadership and ideas of the most dominant class in Assamese society, in the pre-independence period and also in the post-independence period.¹⁵

Notes & References

1. Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony* (Ajanta books International : Delhi : Forthcoming).
2. Manorama Sharma, "The Assamese Middle Class : Its Ascendance to Hegemony (1860-191)" (Ph. D. Abstract : *NEHU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* ; Vol. IV, No. 3.)
3. For details of Middle Class ideology see, N. Poulantzas, *Class in a Capitalist Society*.
4. In the Xth NEIHA Conference where this paper was placed for discussion Dr. Amalendu Guha argued that the middle class did not have a hegemony in Assam because the aims and aspirations of various sections of the Assamese society remained unfulfilled as is evident from later conflicts in Assamese society. But it must be remembered that the concept of hegemony does not include fulfilling aims and aspirations of all sections of the people. For further details on concept of hegemony see, P. Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci", *New Left Review*, No. 100, November 1976 - January 1977 ; Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith (ed. & translated) ; *Selections from the Prison Note Book of Antonio Gramsci* (New York : 1975) ; G. A. Williams, "Gramsci's Concept of Egemonia" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 21, No. 4.
5. For details of the Anti-British uprisings in the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills see, D. R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya : Policy and Pattern* (Deihi : 1989) ; M. S. Sangma, "Sonaram R. Sangma (A Study of his Life and Works as a Garo Nationalist)", *NEIHA Proceedings, VIth Session 1985* (Shillong : 1986).

6. Kathleen Gough, "Indian Peasant Uprisings" in A. R. Desai (ed.) *Peasant Struggles in India* (New Delhi : 1979).
7. For details refer, H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company 1826-1858* (Gauhati : 1963) Chs. I & II.
H. K. Barpujari (ed.) *Political History of Assam* Volt. I, (Gauhati : 1977) Ch. II.
8. See *Political History of Assam*, Ibid., Ch. VI and S. Goswami, "Land Settlement and Reforms in 19th Century Assam", in A. Goswami (ed.) *Land Reforms an Peasant Movements* (Gauhati : 1986).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
10. H. K. Barpujari (ed.) *Political History of Assam, op. cit.*, p. 90.
11. For details of this see, M. Sharma, "Peasant Unrest in 19th century Assam : Peasant Vs State" in A Goswami (ed.) *Land Reforms A Peasant Movement, op. cit.*
12. See, S. N. Sharma (Ed. & Compiled) *Mou* (Gauhati 1980) pp. 72-75.
13. These petitions and their nature, and the difference between the emerging middle class and the early gentry which had dominated life in Assam till then has been discussed in details in Manorama Sharma, "The Assamese Middle Class : Its Ascendence to Hegemony (1860-1910)" (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, NEHU, Shillong), Chs. VI & VII.
14. N. Poulantzas, *Class in a Capitalist Society, op. cit*, p. 295.
15. Although with the growth of the communist movement some leftist peasant organisations did come up, yet they remained confined to their own pockets and compared to the influence of the middle class on the peasantry the impact of the left movement was not as significant.