

The Raj mels : Their Historic Role in Peasant Movements of Assam

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Assamese rural society in the nineteenth century was undergoing a process of change often marked by a high-degree of class solidarity and political awareness and culminating in a series of violent agrarian outbreaks. For a fairly long time before the coming of the British a strong feeling of insecurity and depression had gripped the agricultural community of the province. Even after the arrival of the British the situation did not improve much as the Assamese ryots continued to reel under a heavy burden of taxation. In fact the radical and sweeping administrative changes brought about by the new rulers profoundly affected the peasants whose conditions began to deteriorate with every reassessment. Strangely, the revenue demand was raised from time to time despite the fact that there was neither any change in the general crop pattern nor any noticeable extension of cultivation. Quite expectedly, in Assam, in the absence of any recognised principle of fixing revenue for a definite period of time the ryots were constantly perturbed by a feeling of impending enhancement of land revenue. Again, in pre-British times land in Assam was owned collectively by a clan or community, each adult member of the clan was given two *pooras* (approximately three acres) of revenue-free land in lieu of personal service to the state. With the introduction of British rule the practice of accepting manual service was replaced by a money tax. Gradually the demand for cash was so swiftly increasing that the peasants were unable to keep pace with the growing demand. Many of them, therefore, had no other alternative but to sell a considerable part of their output to meet the revenue demand, while their consumption-oriented mode of production remained virtually unchanged. "In the given transitional situation of a deficient currency supply and extremely limited facilities of marketing farm products", the policy of exacting revenue in cash created widespread resentment and hardship of the peasants.

Understandably, therefore, economic discontent aroused political consciousness, and both, in turn, paved the way for organised challenge to British rule, the peasants being, as usual, in the forefront of the uprisings. In reality the spontaneity of the masses in taking initiative in organising the *riaj mels* (peoples asseblies) for social and political purposes had been a unique feature of nineteenth century Assamese agrarian life. These *mels*, originally emerging because of necessity, did play a very useful part in the resistance movements of the post-Revolt period, their earliest recorded involvement in peasant upsurge being at Phulaguri (near Raha) in 1861.² A *mel* in Assam was a 'time-honoured institution' and a 'recognised feature' of Assamese social life, for in a period when legal and constitutional remedy was unthinkable, it was the only means through which the people could hope to obtain protection from the oppression of the local functionaries.³ With the progress of British rule the *mels* became important organs of ventilating popular grievances, at times of demonstrating peoples' dislike of certain administrative measures of the government. In the second half of the nineteenth century congregation of the ryots under the leadership of the village elders for the purpose of safeguarding their mutual interests had become common and at the time of the Nowgong outbreak of 1861, a number of such assemblies were held in and around Phulaguri, most of them with active support and patronage of the local leaders. One such meeting of the ryots was scheduled for five continuous days in order to allow the people to come from distant areas to take part in the deliberations. The chief objective of convening this *mel* was to voice their apprehension of the *pan* tax and also to show their anguish for prohibiting the poppy cultivation. They were also unhappy because all along the Deputy Commissioner of the district had been paying a deaf ear to their difficulties and despite their inability to pay revenue in time they had not been able to make the officer understand their plight, who instead of attending to their grievances fined and imprisoned their leaders.⁵ Under the leadership of their *mels* the ryots of several villages were thus united to defend themselves from the exploitation of their rulers. The aggrieved ryots were not prepared to surrender to their fate but were determined to carry on the struggle till their demands were fulfilled. Well-organised and always well-attended, these *mels* provided ample opportunities to the masses not only to discuss their problems and means of redress but also to develop a spirit of independence and self reliance.⁶ From 1869 *mels* were re-

gularly held at Patharughat in Mangaldoi sub-division and at Gobinipur, Hadira and Bajali in North Kamrup. The ryots discussed in these *mels* matters relating to the recent enhancement of land revenue. At Patharughat the agitated ryots became aggressive and opposed the measure by besieging the then Deputy Commissioner of the district Colonel Comber, and the Sub-Divisional Officer, J. J. S. Driberg, when they were staying in a rest house near the Mangaldoi road, though without resorting to any extreme step.⁷ The district authorities were alarmed. In most cases the assemblies were disrupted, "but the smouldering ambers of discontent lay dormant and manifested itself occasionally in the gatherings at *namghars* and mosques."⁸

From the very beginning, however, the British officers took a serious view of the *mels*. They often treated them as 'unlawful assemblies' constituted for the purpose of demonstrating the numbers of ryots and which if not properly dealt with in right time "may assume any proportion and be the instruments of any excess."⁹ In a letter to the Bengal Government dated 8 November, 1861, Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam, described the *mel* as 'an assembly of persons met together to obtain from their rulers by a display of their numbers, if not by clamour and a quasi demonstration of physical force, the redress of such grievances against which if they complained singly they imagine their complaint would pass unheeded or with them further mischief.'¹⁰ Expressing an identical opinion R. B. McCabe, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, described the *mel* as an embodiment of collective strength of the people. He wrote, "These *mels* are governed by the leading *dolois* or *gossains* and by the principal landholders of the district. I can only compare the authority of these *mels* to that wielded by the *Vehmgericht* or, to come to more modern times, by the Nihilists. The unfortunate ryot who has to pay his land revenue is met by the *tahsildar* on one side, who says "If you do not pay, your property will be attached", and on the other side by the *Raij*, i.e. the embodiment of the orders of the *mel*, which states "If you do pay you are cursed and excommunicated". He has therefore to face loss of property on the one side or social ostracism on the other."¹¹ It is a pity that most of the British officers did not care to understand the real cause of peasant unrest, but often took a partisan view of the *mels* and held them chiefly responsible for the growing militancy among the peasants.

Notwithstanding their opposition some of these officers originally did look to these assemblies for support of their admini-

strative measures. They even tried to entice the leaders who exercised great power and influence in the working of the *mels*. But finding the *mels* too risky to rely upon, they began to suppress them with brute force, acting as they were under the general belief that "if British paramountcy was to be preserved in Assam the *mels* must be crushed...."¹ It may be recalled that it was Lt. Sconce's (Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong) policy of frequently disrupting the *mels* which drove the ryots of Paulaguri to the war path. Be that as it may the policy of repression failed to produce the desired result as peasant militancy found a new expression thereafter through organised protests and demonstration.¹³ In the words of a modern writer : "They (the *mels*) also gave an indication of what the mass people could do to shake the foundations of the imperial power when properly roused from the state of neglect in which they lived, and guided in their activities as they were when the fight for freedom began under the banner of the Congress."¹⁴

During the next three decades slow agricultural development of the province profoundly affected the Assamese peasantry. They began to reel under the increasing burden of land revenue which in the settlement of 1883 was raised by about 53 per cent on the average, but in some areas it was as high as 80 to 100 per cent.¹⁵ Interestingly, this rising trend was maintained even though there was hardly a corresponding improvement in the overall financial conditions of the people. Under the circumstances the ryots had to once again look towards the *raij mels* for protection. Consequently large number of *mels* were convened in different parts of the districts of Kamrup and Darrang, and with support and blessings of some well-to-do persons of the locality (including the *dollois* and the *gossain* necessary preparations were made to oppose the governmental measure. The ryots discussed in these *mels* not merely matters relating to the increasing and almost unbearable economic burden imposed on them by the enhanced taxation, but also expressed their determination to resist exploitation, even at the cost of their own lives, if necessary. No wonder with the progress of time the *mels* began to exercise tremendous power. The support given to them by some of the newly-founded social organisations like the *Jorhat Sorbojanik Sobha* which held a series of meetings to "protest against the policy of the Government for an excessive increase of revenue"¹⁶ must have indirectly encouraged them to boldly take up the cause of the suffering masses. They were thus to a great extent successful in uniting the ryots of

all castes and communities against the government.¹⁷ The peasants were now joined in their fight against the government by the artisans, and in some cases, the non-cultivating landowners.¹⁸ The *mels* therefore once again took a leading part in the peasant movement of late nineteenth century Assam and no ryot could disobey the decisions of the *mels* without facing social ostracism and other penalties.¹⁹

From 1892 the *mels* became very active in Rangia and Lachima. A mammoth meeting of the ryots, mostly Kacharis, was held at Bolagaon, near Rangia, on the evening of 24 December, 1893. On their way back after attending the *mel* the people destroyed large number of huts near the Rangia bazar (market) and threatened the Marwari shopkeepers that they would return again on the 30th to loot their shops.²⁰ Incidentally, at about 9 A. M. of the same day an unruly crowd of 250 men raided the Rangia market and destroyed property worth Rs. 300. Meanwhile peasant meetings were held at various places of North Kamrup. To put pressure on the government the people launched a vigorous no-rent campaign. The ryots were warned that any attempt to pay revenue would be considered as a gross disrespect shown to the *mels*.²¹ It is true that all the ryots were not equally militant and there were many who were inclined to pay revenue at the revised rates rather than fight a prolonged battle but they were prevented from doing so by their *mels*. "How can we disobey the *Raijar Hukum*?"—was the usual expression of helplessness of the ryots.²² Thus caught in a dilemma of losing property if they did not pay revenue in time and on the other hand of being 'cursed and excommunicated' in case they did so, many poor ryots did not know what to do. Who was superior — the government or the *mel*? This was a question which they were unable to answer.²³

The bold defiance of the peasants at Rangia inspired their fellow-brothers at Lachima and some other places of North Kamrup to oppose enhancement of land revenue. Soon *mels* were held at Nalbari, Barama, Bajali and many other places. In Barama, in particular, meetings were held almost daily. The *Mels* appointed their own *dak* (postal) peons "to carry orders from one village to another, and organised a corps of *lathials* to oppose attachment of property". The ryots were further advised not to obtain auctioned property of a fellow-villager.²⁴ The government officers unfortunately remained indifferent to the genuine difficulties of the peasants but were determined to nip the nascent spirit of unity and solidarity of the peasantry in the bud. Orders prohibiting the holding of *mels* without prior permission of the district authorities

were issued ;²⁵ in some cases the meetings were forcibly broken up. In these places the people were inhumanly tortured and their property confiscated. Obviously, all these measures succeeded in arresting the progress of the resistance movement. But the moral courage of the peasantry, "coming from deep-rooted filial organisations"²⁶ and their determination to resist injustice continued to guide them in their struggle against the government in the subsequent years.²⁷

The echo of the Kamrup uprisings was heard at Patharughat, about twenty kilometers to the east of the Kamrup border. It was on 24 January, 1894, the Deputy Commissioner of the Darrang district, J. D. Anderson, first heard about a *mel* in Sipajhar area which was reportedly attended by thousands of ryots coming from distant places like Mangaldoi and Kolaigaon, and where matters relating to the recent enhancement of land revenue were discussed. Receiving information of similar *mels* being organised at Patharughat and some other places where the peasants had been very much agitated over the last few months and anticipating Rangia type disturbances in those places, the Deputy Commissioner, along with J. Rerngton, Officiating, Commandant of Military Police, arrived at Patharughat on 27 January, 1894. While he was coming to this place the officer saw a number of notices, issued on behalf of the *raij* being pasted on the trunks and branches of the trees from which he came to know that the proposed assembly at Patharughat would be held on the 28th January. The purpose of convening this *mel* was to reaffirm the peasants' determination to resist payment of revenue at the revised rate, and secondly, to transmit their unhappiness to the Deputy Commissioner in the hope that he would be able to reduce the burden of taxation at his own discretion (*kijani khajana bridhi nakare*)²⁸.

No wonder as in Kamrup the *mels* here were the precursor of peasant unrest. In their days of distress the ryots, both Hindus and Muslims, once again looked to the *mels* for guidance and help. Strangely, the Deputy Commissioner, instead of persuading the agitated ryots not to be carried away by the belief that the government was unsympathetic to their plight, foolishly called in the police to drive the mob who had already gathered in front of the rest house where the officer was encamping, to the other side of the Mangaldoi road. What followed on that fateful day (28 January, 1894) is too well known. With grim determination the people fought a pitched battle (*doli ran*) with the help of their traditional arms, the fish spears, bamboo sticks and clods of earth. The

police replied with volleys of gunshots, killing at least fifteen and injuring not less than thirty-seven.²⁹ Two months later, on 29 March, 1894, Dr. Rash Behary Ghose caused a furor in the imperial Legislative Council by questioning the propriety of the Government's revenue policy and expressing his resentment at the repressive policy followed by the local authorities. At last the Government of India realised the folly of using force on an unwilling people and communicated its decision of further diminishing the rates of land revenue to 32.7 per cent, and also limiting the increase on an individual holding to about 50 per cent on the previous rental.³⁰

The wide-spread peasant movements, 'based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non-cultivating and owners', heralded the beginning of a new era of peasant awakening in Assam by effectively upholding the value and utility of organised resistance to governmental injustice. The emerging middle class made common cause with the peasants and helped them keep alive their new-born spirit, though the emphasis was gradually shifted from militant to a constitutional path of struggle. The popular *raij mels* were converted into more representative and broad-based organisations—the Ryot *Sobhas*, with active support of the Assamese middle class. Most of these Ryot *Sobhas* maintained close links with national organisations and many of their representatives attended annual sessions of the Indian National Congress. Still later, under the influence of the Congress, a number of peasant associations were formed in remote areas like Charduar, Naduar, Sootia and Choyduar in Darrang District.³¹ Not alone the ryot *sobhas*—a socio-cultural organisation like the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* boldly took up the cause of the peasants and mobilised public opinion in their favour. Peasant movements, therefore did not remain confined to the rural areas; gradually the urban elite began to make "a united front with the proprietary peasants on all common issues against the rulers."³² The unity of purpose and idea, which was very much discernible in these struggles, found a new direction thereafter.

Notes & References

1. A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, Delhi, 1977, p. 8.
2. For details of the Phulaguri Revolt see Shrutidev Goswami, 'Raij versus the Raj. The Nowgong Outbreak (1861) in Historical Perspective' in J. B. Battacharjee (ed), *Studies in the History of North East India*, Shillong, 1986, pp. 123-34.

3. Assam Secretariat Records (hereafter ASR), Commissioner's Office, File No. 401, 9361-63, Hopkinson to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 8 November, 1861.
4. H. K. Barpujari (ed), *Political History of Assam*, vol. i, 1826-1919, Gauhati, 1977, p.91.
5. ASR, Commissioner's Office, File No. 409, 1861-1863, Lushington to Agnew, 31 May, 1862.
6. The popular aphorism *raijai raja* (none but the people themselves are supreme) perhaps could be understood in this context.
7. ASR, Home A proceedings, September, 1894 No. 320, Godfrey to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 March, 1894.
8. H K. Barpujari (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 96.
9. ASR, Commissioner's Office, File No. 409, 1861-1863, Hopkinson to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 8 November, 1861.
10. *Ibid.*
11. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 252, McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 12 January, 1894.
12. K. N. Dutta, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, Gauhati (reprint), 1969, p. 37
13. That the policy of disrupting the *mels* was inexpedient was admitted by no other a person than Sir John Peter Grant, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, who, while commenting on the Lieutenant Sconce's imprudence, remarked that a more careful exercise of discretion in respect of each particular *mel* would have been better than the adoption of a general policy of prohibition. ASR, Commissioner's Office, File No. 409, 1861-1863, Gordon to Commissioner of Assam, 19 December, 1861.
14. K. N. Dutta, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
15. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 326, see Questions put by Rash Behary Ghose at the Imperial Legislative Council and Answer given 29 March, 1894.
16. *Royal Commission on Opium, Minutes of Evidence*, vol. ii, p. 299, see evidence of Jagannath Barooah, 28 December, 1893.

17. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 252 McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 12 January, 1894.
18. A. Guha *p. cit.*, p. 54.
19. K. N. Dutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.
20. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 252, McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 12 January, 1894.
21. *Ibid*, No. 258, Diary of McCabe, 6 January, 1894.
22. *Ibid*, No. 252, McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 12 January, 1894.
23. *Ibid*, No. 286, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 12 February, 1894.

In a statement recorded before McCabe, Bijoy Chaudhuri, a tenant of Pati Darrang *tahsil*, reported that on 22 December, 1893, one Monu Gaon Burha approached him with a message that he had been summoned by the *mel* (*Rajinibodiche*). When he arrived at the place of the meeting he saw a few respectable persons of the area discussing something. On seeing him all of them began to reproach him for paying revenue against the direction of the *mel* and asked him to pay Rs. 25 as fine. On being informed that he did not have the money with him he was told that he must pay by thursday next or his house would be looted. The poor villager had no power to defy the order of the *mel* and paid the fine. *Ibid*, No. 253, Memo by McCabe, 11 January, 1894.

24. *Ibid*, No. 312, McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 22 February, 1894.
25. The order banning the holding of *mel*s was as follows : "Whereas the assembly of *mel*s in the district of Kamrup had resulted in riot and criminal intimidation, it is hereby ordered that no *mel* shall assemble within the *tahsils* of Pati-darrang, Rangia, Nalbari, Tambulpur, Hajo, Boroma and Bajali, or in the *mouza* of Shurukhetri without the permission of the Deputy Commissioner. Any person joining such assembly after the issue of the notice will be punished according to law." *Ibid*, No. 257, Notice by McCabe, 10 January, 1894.

26. Monorama Sharma, 'Peasant Unrest in Nineteenth Century Assam, Peasant VS State', in Atul Goswami (ed), *Land Reforms and Peasant Movement*, New Delhi, 1896, p. 102.
- 27 To McCabe the demeanour of the ryots was so insolent that sometimes he found his orders difficult to execute. Once when a group of ryots of Rangia came to meet him to discuss certain matters the Deputy Commissioner asked them to send their leaders (*dangar manuh*) instead. Prompt came their reply, "We are all *dangar*". ASR. Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 258, Diary of McCabe, 8 January, 1894.
28. *Ibia*, No. 277, Anderson to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 30 January, 1894.
29. *Ibia*, No. 320 Godfrey to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 March 1894; also *The Hindu Patriot*, 5 February 1894.
30. *Ibia*, No. 326 see Questions put by Rash Behary Ghose at the Imperial Legislative Council and Answers given, 29 March, 1894.
31. H. K. Barpujari (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 159, foot note.
32. A. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 62.