

Peasants' Revolt At Sarukhetri : The Raijmel

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With the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, expelling the Burmese, the British East India Company introduced their rule in Assam thereby bringing about gradual changes in Judicial, Administrative and Revenue spheres. "These changes were instrumental in bringing about a radical transformation of the entire socio-economic fabric of the Assamese rural society".¹

Agriculture was the mainstay of the rural populace. With the imposition of various taxes like income, hearth etc. and specifically with the enhancement of land revenue of the districts of Assam, by the British Administrators, after the revolt of 1857, to overcome themselves of their financial constraints, that far reaching changes economically, politically and socially began to take place in the rural Assamese society. "Unfortunately, the revenue demand had been 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",² Moreover, the Assamese peasants or raiyats hitherto were aware of revenue assessments as that only exclusively laid down by the ancient Hindu Legislators viz. 1/6th of the produce of the land. Again in pre-British era, land in Assam was owned collectively by a clan or community, each adult member of the clan was given two *puras* (approximately three Acres or eight *Bighas*) of revenue free land in lieu of personal service to the State. It was with the introduction of British Rule, that the practice of accepting manual service was replaced by money tax.³ Thus the peasants began to reel under the heavy burden "of the progressive enhancement of land revenue and other taxes". More so 'the accompanying monetisation process that was suddenly enforced was also somewhat disastrous in its initial impact'.⁴ Thus "in the given transitional situation of a deficient currency supply and extremely limited facilities of marketing of farm products",⁵ the policy of exacting revenue and that too in cash was bound to create hardship and economic grievance of the peasants as they had been victims of oppression. This economic discontent aroused the political consciousness of the peasants, which however would not have come forth, perhaps had it not been for the *Raij Mels*, a socio-political body of the villagers headed

by their elders which motivated the peasants for the upsurge right from Phulaguri in Nowgong in 1861 till the 1893 Assam Riots at Patharughat, Rangia and Sarukhetri etc. McCabe, the then Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, in his report made in 1894 clearly stated that:

The ordinary village Panchayat, originally constituted as an authority on social matters has developed into the mels or assembly, not only of the members of a village but of whole of the inhabitants of even one or more Tehsils. These mels are governed by the leading Dolois or Gosains and by the principal landholders of the district.⁶

I propose to discuss through my paper exclusively on the outbreak of the peasants that took place in Sarukhetri Mouza of the erstwhile Kamrup District of Assam (Sarukhetri Mouza is however, presently under the Barpeta District), basing my analysis particularly on oral sources with partial reference to archival records and specific secondary works. The said Sarukhetri *Mouza* situated on the east of Barpeta *Mahkuma* and west of Nalbari *Mahkuma* comprised of different villages like Byaskuchi, Kapla, Rauli, Banlakuchi, Lachima, Haladhibari, Singra, Gomura, Karakuchi, Namsala, Palla, Sarthebari, Amrikhowa, Nasatra, etc. aligned to the *Bhagavat Dharma* of Sreemanta Sankardeva. (The area had been identified as *Khetri* since the days of the Ahoms and has been so named because of the composition of the *Khetras* or religious units of Sankardeva's *Ek-Saran Bhagavat Dharma*). During the British Rule, around the year 1836-42, for administrative purposes, the adjacent villages or *khetras* were brought into one, to form the Sarukhetri *Mouza*. About a hundred years ago, when the peasant rebellion broke out, the Sarukhetri *Mouza* was a backward area with no schools or centres of education, lack of transport and communication and large low-lying areas of swampy and dense forest. The means of subsistence of the people was minimal based on agriculture, trade and more particularly in bell metal activities (*Kah-Silpa*) specifically in the Sarthebari and its adjoining areas. (The Government of Assam till today has not yet drawn out any schemes of improvement to modernize the historic bell-metal industry). It is pertinent to mention here that the people of the area use to settle their dispute through an independent *got* of the *Raij* of the area. Therefore they did not need to pursue the official judiciary in the settlement of their discords. Though Sarukhetri was an economically and socially backward area, history had been a witness to the spontaneous urge of independence and independent thinking of the people of the area.⁷

The imposition of various taxes and the frequent enhancement of land revenue, which had resulted in the Peasant's Revolt at Phulaguri, Patharughat and Rangia, had in its wake even affected the Sarukhetri *Mouza*. Historians, however, had extensively dealt with the revolts at Phulaguri, Patharughat and Rangia. But as where the peasant's resistance in the remote *Mouza* of Sarukhetri was concerned, historians had been more or less silent to any extensive details. My effort therefore would be to focus on the occurrences that took place in and around the area. Whatever cultivation was done by the local people of the area was only to meet their personal requirements and they were mostly engaged in religious activities and production of bell metal articles. Most of the lands of the said area were cultivated by the *Chahuas*⁸, who were people visiting this area from neighbouring Chamata, Belsor, Nalbari, Rangiya etc. These *Chahuas* used to come annually for cultivation and even in the dry seasons like September/October they took to the cultivation of mustard seeds. They stayed with the local villagers during the period of cultivation and after completion of their agricultural works they returned home by the month of February after the harvesting season.⁹ Under these circumstances, a situation arose. The British Government, who had by then become revenue administrators, enhanced the land revenue under the Chief Commissionership of William Ward, by 70% to 80% and times even 100% and the highest was in Kamrup District. Lands were divided into *rupit*, *basti* and *faringati*. These enhancements came at a time when the Sarukhetri *Mouza* had already been plagued by frequent floods and adding fuel to the fire was that the lands that which had been cultivated by the *Chahuas* were being assessed and *Pattas* were provided by the *Lat Mandals* in the name of the local people of the village.¹¹ Moreover, on account of scanty population and abundant lands being available, the British authorities for the purpose of increasing the amount of revenue, made settlements of these infertile lands in the name of the local villagers.¹² Therefore, in the process, a system came into existence known as the *Tekeli Bhonga Piyal* i.e. settlement of land in the name of the cultivator by breaking a *tekeli* (an earthen vessel/pot) at the edge of a bamboo stick. What the local people felt was that the *tekeli bhonga piyal* in lieu of settling the land and calculating the revenue from each assessee was in reality *Tekeli bhonga* (i.e. breaking *tekeli*) over their own heads. Thus, lands were settled in the name of the villagers through the said survey, immaterial of the fact as to whether the villagers at all required these large areas of land or would they be able to pay the hiked rate of land revenue of these large tracts of un-yieldable lands at their disposal. Therefore to

pay land revenue by them became a significant problem.¹³ *Mels* were being organized by the people of the area to register their protest against the taxation and revenue policy of the ruling British Government. Oral sources confirmed the organization of *mels* at the *Namghars*, *Maszids* and other religious places of the area, which identifies the *mels* to be above caste, community and creed. However, the peasant's revolt, which took place in the various districts of the Brahmaputra valley, were all beyond any caste, community regulations. History also speaks about the *Dakowals* (Peons) and *Lathials* (Clubs men) who kept communication between the *mels* of various villages. Economic discontent accumulating, the people of the entire Sarukhetri Mouza gathered at a mound like area called the *Panagaon's Tup* which was adjacent to the village of Lachima and Sarthebari. This was the historic *Raij-Mei* of Sarukhetri *Mouza* that saw men from all walks of life like the Raiyats, Bell Metal Artisans, even *Chahuas*, *Satriya Gosains Pathaks*, Brahmin, Muslim and the villagers from the entire Sarukhetri *Mouza*. *Satradhikar of Byaskuchi Satra*, Jogeswar Goswami presided on the occasion. A competent man for the task heard the complaints of the entire people gathered there. People put forth their grievances mainly against the Mandal of the area Haliram Misra, who belonged to the family of Baishnava poet Gobinda Misra. Another accused was the Mouzadar of the area Dasaram Choudhury. The *mel* held at Panagaon decided that henceforth no taxes would be paid by the people of the *Mouza*. Herein be noted that Panagaon was situated in between Sarthebari and Lachima but as far as the *mel* was concerned, it comprised the people of the entire *mouza* right from the *Satradhikar of Byaskuchi Satra* Jogeswar Goswami, the skilled artisan Pusparam Kalita (Kahar), the *Bar-Pathak* of Sarthebari *Panchkhel*¹⁴ Sindhumal Pathak, Bishnu Patowary of Namsala, Bandhuran Adhikary of Nasatra, representatives of the Muslim community like Dhayan Gaon Burha, Nilo Dhulia and Sher Ali etc. Therefore at no point of time it can be exclusively referred to the revolt of Lachima because the mass participation of the peasants, raiyats, artisans and the leaders of the entire Sarukhetri *Mouza* at the *Raij Mel* of Panagaon cannot be overlooked. Even Government records referred to the *mel* of Sarukhetri and not as that of Lachima.¹⁵

In a Notification of 10th January 1894 R.B.McCabe, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, ordered - Whether the assembly or *mels* in the district of Kamrup had resulted in riots and criminal intimidation, it is hereby ordered that no *mels* shall assemble within the Tahsils of Patidarrang, Rangpur, Nalbari, Tamulpur, Hazo, Barama, Bajali or in *Mouza* of Sarukhetri

without the prior permission of the Deputy Commissioner.¹⁶ But *mels* continued unabated. Stories of *mels* being organized even thereafter by the *Gosains* and *Pathaks* through singing of *Naams* popularly called *Raija Naams* or *Rajahuwa Naams* (community) have come down generations. *Bar-Pathak* of *Sarthebari Panch Khel* *Sindhupal Pathak* seems to have innovated this idea of mobilizing public opinion through *naams*.¹⁷

On 21st January 1894, the villagers assaulted Mouzadar Dasaram Choudhury and Haliram Misra Mandal when they went to village Kapla for collection of revenue and said Haliram Mandal, because of mass beating died shortly afterwards. As soon as the above incident came to the knowledge of, the then Extra Assistant Commissioner of Barpeta *Mahkuma*, Madhab Chandra Bordoloi (father of Nabin Chandra Bordoloi), through the constables who had been placed there, about 75 persons were arrested for interrogation in this connection. With the news of this incident spreading out, more than three thousand villagers were believed to have gathered around the temporary camp adjacent to the *Panagaon's Tup* for the release of those arrested persons. The EAC Madhab Chandra Bordoloi faced the indignant crowd. Because of his misbehaviour to *Satradhikar* Jogeswar Goswami and other elders, *Bordoloi* was compelled to pay a fine of Rupees Five. The EAC apprehending his incapability in handling the matter, fled and sought the help of the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup R.B.McCabe who personally reached the area on the 24th of January with a party of Sepoys of the 13th Bengal Native Infantry.¹⁸ McCabe's arrival was perhaps to come to a communication with the leaders of the revolt to bring forth a solution, but none came forward. With shame and anger, McCabe ordered rounds of attack around the entire Sarukhetri Mouza to arrest the ringleaders of the riot. By 25th January 1894, 59 persons were arrested and lodged up in a temporary lock up where more than six thousand raiyats later gathered and pleaded for the release of their fellow beings and declined to pay the enhanced revenue. As per A.S. Home-A Progs., September 1894 Nos. 220-334 Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots, where it has been mentioned in the Report of the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup R.B.McCabe, that on the 25th January when he arrested 59 principal offenders, he came across a mob of 6000 raiyats who had given him an 'impertinent letter' signed by them through which they declined to pay revenue and demanded a release of the prisoners.¹⁹ This incident indicates that the rebel leaders had sought to redress their grievances initially through a non-violent approach by giving letter 'impertinent' no doubt. It is only when their pleas were not heeded to,

that they resorted to a militant form of struggle. The Government stand was that the peasants occupying lands after 1st April 1893 virtually meant acceptance of the revised settlement and henceforth future non-payment of the government demands was to expect 'Bakijai' notices.²⁰

Thereafter the entire Sarukhetri Mouza were subjected to inhuman police atrocities and oral sources also relates as to how the tinkling sounds of the bell metal industry existent in and around the mouza was silenced after this heinous torture. The religious and famous annual festival 'Sabha' held at Sarthebari was closed down for three years since then as a mark of respect, honour to the peasants' resistant movement, who were believed to have fought for a noble cause. But the spirit of the people of Sarukhetri did not die down to combat the British Authorities. The EAC of Barpeta Mahkuma commenced a preliminary enquiry of the rioting and assault of the Mouzadar and the Mandal on 21st January 1894 which ultimately had led to the death of the Mandal.²¹ Several people were imprisoned and finally 16 were made accused in the Criminal Case – The Queen-Empress *versus* Nao Chaku Kalita & 15 others.²² Ultimately, in the said Criminal Case the most vocal of the bell metal artisans Pusparam Kalita Kahar and 11 others were sentenced to three-year rigorous imprisonment, which was however reduced to two years through an appeal.

The peasant's revolt of Sarukhetri became a cherished memory for the people of the area and the centenary of the same was celebrated. After 1894 with the reduction of revenues by the British Government, there was no future outbreak of peasants. But they fully did not reconcile to the British Rule either. In fact they provided the mainstay of the freedom struggle in Assam.²³ Udayon Misra in his *Periphery Strikes Back – Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland – the Quest for Swadhin Assam* says that "these Peasants' uprisings were directed against the British Government in a bid to force it change its uxorious taxation laws. At no stage of their struggle is there evidence to suggest that the peasants' thought of launching a movement aimed at making the British to quit the province".²⁴ One has to admit that these peasants' revolt and the *Raij Mels* were directed exclusively against the tax and revenue policy of the British no doubt but simultaneously there was the growth of political consciousness too. Dr.S.D.Goswami in his Presidential Address of the XXIInd Session of the North East India History Association at Tezpur has too mentioned of the peasants' rebellion and has referred to as how economic discontent roused political awareness and both in turn paved

the way for organized challenge to British Rule.²⁵ The *Raij Mels* so motivated the peasants and the villagers of Sarukhetri that they learnt to fight for their rights against oppression. That the people of a remote village like Sarukhetri *Mouza* could voice their protest against the unjust practices of the mighty British-Raj was itself an indication of the rousing political consciousness of the people of the area. The reduction of land revenue ultimately by the British Government speaks for itself the success of the peasants' revolt, which could be considered as enough groundwork and a stepping-stone to the National Movement.

Notes & References

1. Shrutidev Goswami, "The Nationalist Upsurge: its impact on peasants and tea garden workers" in Arun Bhuyan (ed). *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, 2000, p. 187.
2. Shrutidev Goswami, "The Raij Mels: Their Historic Role in Peasant Movements in Assam" in Xth Session of NEIHA, p. 300.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Amalendu Guha, '*Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam*' 1826-1947, Delhi, 1977, p. 8.
5. *Ibid.*
6. H.K.Barpujari (ed). *Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. V, Publication Board, Assam, p. 30.
7. Rabindra Talukdar, "Sarukhetri Anchalar Artha Samajik Disat Abhumuki", *Bhortal*, Assam Sahitya Sabha, 61th Session, Smriti Grantha, p. 147.
8. Asamiya Abhidhan defines 'Chah' as to cultivate or to till and therefore 'Chahuas' means one who cultivates or tills i.e. a cultivator or a tiller.
9. Nabin Chandra Deka, "Raij-Mel (Sarthebari Anchalar ati Praja-Bidrohar Jiya Kahini)", *Smritigrantha*, Swadhinatar Rupali Jayanti, Barpeta Mahkuma, p. 142.
10. H.K.Barpujari (ed). *Political History of Assam*, Voll, 1826-1919, Gauhati, 1977, p. 96.
11. Rajendra Nath Deka, "Swadinata Sangramat Sarukhetrir Abadan", *Smritigrantha*, Swadhinatar Rupali Jayanti, Barpeta Mahkuma, p. 56.
12. *Sarukhetri Raijmel Satabarshiki Smriti Grantha*, February 1994.

13. Nabin Chandra Deka, "Raij-Mel (Arthebari Anchalar ati Praja-Bidrohar Jiya Kahini)", *Smritigrantha*, Swadhinatar Rupali Jayanti, Barpeta Mahkuma, p. 142.
14. *Sarthebari Panchkhel* comprises of Salakathiyather, Kajither, Talukdarther, Atather and Tamulither Khels.
15. *A.S. Home-A. Progs., September 1894, Nos. 220-344, Rangia, Lachima, and Patharughat Riots*, p. 10.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Information gathered through conversation of the author with the family of Sindhumal Pathak, a revolutionary leader of the area who ultimately had to flee from his hometown for police atrocities to Kamalabari Satra of Majuli.
18. *A.S. Home-A. Progs., September 1894, Nos. 220-344, Rangia, Lachima, and Patharughat Riots*, p. 27.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *A.S. Home-A. Progs., Novemebr 1894, Nos 88-100., The Lachima, Rioting Case.*
22. *Ibid.* [Initially 59 persons as principal offenders were arrested for taking part in the riot that took place in Mouza Sarukhetri in the Barpeta Sub-division on the 21st and 25th January 1894 known as Lachima Rioting Case. Out of them 16 were made accused in a Criminal Case-The Queen-Empress *versus* Nao Chakhu Kalita and 15 others. They were – Puspa Ram Kalita, Debi Dutta Sarma, Jayanti Bej, Nibhorsa Kalita, Nao Chakhu Kalita, Manglu Saod, Markatu Bhaoria, Nibhorsa Saod, Bana Gaonburha, Sona Ram Saod, Bandhu Ram Saod, Bhebal Kalita, Hanu Bej, Siyala Kalita, Moheswar Sarma and Harakanta Sarma. The Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, R.B.McCabe, Esq., I.C.S., tried them and on 26th of March 1894 they were convicted by him of offences under Section 325 and 149 of Indian Penal Code. First 12 of the said accused were sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment and the last four to rigorous imprisonment for one year each. On appeal to the then Judge of the Assam Valley Districts G.Godfrey, Esq., I.C.S., he vide his judgment & order dated 23rd April 1894 altered the said conviction to Section 147 of the Indian Penal Code and sentences were reduced in case of the first 12 accused to two years rigorous imprisonment and the last 4 to nine months'

rigorous imprisonment. Against the same, the accused preferred an appeal before the High Court of Judicature at Fort William in Bengal. The division bench of the said Court, vide their Judgment dated 9th August 1894 did not think it proper to disturb the orders of the Lower Appellate Court interfering with the sentences passed upon the accused in the said case but as the feeling of political excitement which gave rise to the riot had passed away, desired that the Chief Commissioner may dispose to remit some part of the sentences on those accused who are not shown to have taken an active part in the attack on Haliram Mandal. Accordingly, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, on the basis of the recommendation of the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts and the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, vide his order dated 5th October 1894 directed remission of sentences with regard to ten prisoners. He sanctioned immediate release of the prisoners Moheswar Sarma and Harakanta Sarma, and the reduction of the sentences passed on the prisoners – Hanu Bej & Siyala Kalita sentenced to nine months' rigorous imprisonment reduced from one year; Sona Ram Saod, Bandhu Ram Saod & Bhebal Kalita sentenced to one years' rigorous imprisonment reduced from two years' and Markatu Bhaoria, Nibhorsa Saod & Bana Gaonburha sentenced to eighteen months' rigorous imprisonment reduced from two years. But with regard to other six prisoners namely Puspa Ram Kalita, Debi Dutta Sarma, Jayanti Bej, Nibhorsa Kalita, Nao Chakhu Kalita and Manglu Saod, the sentences already passed for two years' rigorous imprisonment were not interfered with.]

23. Rajen Saikia, *Social & Economic History of Assam, 1853-1921*, Manohar, 2000, p. 109.
24. Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back – Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland*, 2000, p. 75.
25. S.D.Goswami, *President Address, Proceedings of XXIIInd Session NEIHA at Tezpur*, p. 8.

Nasatra village presently in Paka Mouza of Barpeta District, Assam.