

Emergence of Mass-organisation (Rayat Sabha) and its role : An Experience of Darrang District of Assam

Subhas Saha

'Mass-organisation' the term itself does not represent masses in general, masses cannot be considered as a kind of homogeneous and a single group.¹ In a classified society, masses have been divided into several classes. Each class forms their own organisation to represent their own aspirations. Sometimes, it involves direct action through various ways like petitions, agitation, demonstration, hartal, picketing etc. by mobilizing themselves for realising certain aspects of demands or grievances from their immediate authority, which appears to be a hindrance and is supposed to possess power to resolve it. The social base of these organisations depends upon its socio-economic and political orientation of the grievances. The character and militancy of these organisations certainly differ from organisation to organisation depending upon the nature of class-antagonism, genuineness of the grievances and also the dynamics of leadership. The method of actions also varies according to the strategy and to the character on class-basis of the leadership. Mass-organisation generally does not keep direct contact with the political parties though it involves in politics.

With the coming of the British in India and the introduction of new agrarian and industrial policy, the stratification process accelerated rapidly. The introduction of land-revenue-settlement in the rayatwary and temporary Zamindari areas, finally, completed the settlement of proprietary rights of various groups of feudal landlords, on the basis of private land-ownership. Result is that the homogeneity of Indian society (in respect of self-sufficient village economy) started to be strangled and consequently led to the formation of a heterogenous classified society. Besides as the private ownership of land was consolidated, land acquired a value and was raised to the status of market commodity. Land became best means of security for the money lender's credit. Money lenders, traders, feudal landlords took the opportunity to seize peasant's

land, taking mortgage of it, at their hard time, with the plea of helping them. Thus, the independent peasants were forced to become just tenant 'burdened with crippling rents.' In the rural arena, this stratification had been accelerated fast. The distinct formation of Zamindary class, intermediary and money lending groups swifted the growth of rapid pauperisation of the entire rural masses. Within the land owning masses, there were categories or classification based upon the size of land-holding. The emergence of such varied types of land-owning peasants widened the gulf between various classes. Similarly, in the urban arena too, the satisfaction started speedily with the emergence of a distinct class of capitalist groups. Inflow of British capital and its investment in India intensified the growth of capitalism. Meanwhile, 'the ruined creafstmen and the impoverished peasants provided the first detachments of a working class for plantation, construction work and the first factories and textile mills.* In fact, the alien rule completely changed the structure of Indian society.

A clear hierarchy of classes emerged out before coming of the 19th century. Naturally, economic discontent plus growing political consciousness of the people paved the way for organised challenge to the alien rule. By the end of the eighteenth century, as the stratification process was already crystallized, severel mass-organisation emerged out in the beginning of the 19th century. All these organisations sprang up all over to represent growing tide of discontent among the Indian masses in general against the colonial rule. Though basically, these organisations were anti-colonial in their objective, militancy of these varied considerably. For instance, mass organisations like Puna Sarwajnik Sabha (1870) and Indian Association, confined their activities in the increased representation of well-to-do Indian elites in the government-functionary bodies of the colonial rule. Though they voiced against racial discrimination, never tried to mobilize people effectively against the colonial authority. Basic weakness and limitation of these organisations can be examined in the class character of its leadership. Contrary to these, mass-organisations like Rayat Sabhas and Bombay Workers Association, for instance, played a significant role in mobilizing rayats and the workers effectively against the colonial authority. Throughout the 19th century, India witnessed numerous peasant uprisings all over. In most of the cases, rayats or the lower strata of the peasantry gave the militant leadership in organising it from its stage of sponteneity to the stage of armed struggle. These uprisings, though started initially against the feudal land lords'

exploitation, soon turned against the imperialist rule. The industrial workers too got themselves united against the ruthless capitalist exploitation during this period. Between 1882 and 1890, twenty-five strikes broke out, mostly in the textile mills of Bombay and Madras provinces. The wave of strikes later spread over every where, where there were capitalist enterprises. With the rise of national struggle under the leadership of national parties, all these movements led by the mass-organisation merged into a broad united mass movement against the imperialist rule. A. R. Desai has rightly pointed out that

..... the national movement grew and gathered strength as new classes, off-springs of the new economic structure and living under the same state regime, finding their free and full development thwarted under the extant social and political conditions, increasingly organised themselves on a national scale and started various movements to remove the obstacles impeding their growth.³

The importance of mass-organisation at the grass-root level therefore, cannot be ignored but demands systematic study of its role and impact on the society.

This paper intends to study the role of the peasant mass-organisation (Rayat Sabha) in Assam and its impact during 1942 struggle in the district of Darrang. The study is exclusively based on secondary sources and hence the limitation of this paper is quite obvious.

Administrative Changes in Darrang

The East India Company annexed Assam in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandaboo including Darrang district. Before 1826, the district was under the Ahom rule. The East India Company divided Ahom kingdom into two parts consisting of Upper Assam and Lower Assam. The Lower Assam was placed under the jurisdiction of British administration while the Upper Assam was left to Purandar Singh, the then Ahom Raja, as a tributary king.⁴

In 1833, the E. I. Co. re-oriented their policy and by virtue of this re-settlement, administration of Lower Assam was placed under an administrative unit, consisting of three districts, one of which was Darrang.⁵

The jurisdiction of Darrang was extended from Bar-Nadi in the west to Viswanath (presently Viswanath Chariali) in the east, with administrative headquarters at Mongaldai. Considering the threat of frequent floods and erosion, a proposal was made to station headquarters at Viswanath but later on shifted finally to Tezpur,

a centrally located place, in 1835. Since then, Tezpur remained as the headquarter of the district of Darrang till 1947. Till 1874, province of Assam was under the jurisdiction of the Government of Bengal. But, with the proclamation of the Governor-General-in-Council on 6 February 1874, a separate province of Assam, to be known as the Chief-Commissionership of Assam was formed, comprising the districts of Cachar, Darrang, Garo Hills, Goalpara, Kamrup, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Lakhimpur, Naga Hills, Nowgong and Sibsagar. With the Assam Chief Commissionership Act, 1874, section I, Central Act 9 of 1874, all laws or regulations vested in or applicable by the Lt. Governor and Board of Revenue of Bengal, were transferred to Governor-General in Council and by virtue of it, was made exercisable to separate province of Assam. Thus, 'all the laws and regulation in force in the territories before the formation of the Assam province continued to be in force in the newly formed province of Assam.'⁶

The province of Assam, since then, was subjected to territorial changes several times. With the proclamation dated September 1, 1905, issued by the Governor-General-in-Council, the whole of Assam was amalgamated, on 16 October 1905, with North Bengal and East Bengal, comprising the districts of the Chittagong, Dacca, Rajshahi Commissionerships, with the exception of Darjeeling. There was strong protest against this amalgamation all over Assam, led by the Assamese middle class. Consequently, on April 1, 1912, Eastern Bengal was reunited with West Bengal and Assam was again left to be ruled as a separate province. The status of Assam was raised to Governor's province on April 1, 1937, by virtue of the Government of India Act, 1935, section 45. Since then, there had been no change in the territorial jurisdiction of Assam till the partition of India on August 15, 1947.⁷

The district of Darrang is a flat land of 210 kilometres in length from east to west, nearly a rectangular in size, with slight increased width in the west.

Changes in the land revenue administration

Since 1826 to 1874, there was, in fact, no radical change in the land-revenue administration. It was with the enactment of the Assam Land Revenue Regulation in 1886 under the Chief Commissioner for Assam Province, for the first time, 'conferred a permanent heritable and transferable right to persons holding land under decennial leases'.⁸ According to this Regulation, the paik system of Ahom kingdom, was abolished. The land revenue collection was

placed under *Mauzadary* or *Mahalwary* systems. Earlier *khel* officers in charge of revenue collection were replaced by *Choudhuris*, *Mauzadars*, *Baishyas*, *Patgiris* or *Kakatis*. By virtue of their status, they became intermediary government servants.

Most fundamental changes, that David Scott did was the replacement of revenue collection in kinds by cash. The Chief Commissioner's expectation of deriving revenue of more than three lakhs in Lower Assam, was practically inconsiderable. The whole revenue administrative machinery was so ineffective that it even failed to produce 'either an adequate pecuniary collection to the government or satisfaction to the people.' To enhance the revenue, David Scott planned to collect revenue even from *Lakhiraj* (revenue free) paiks and land. Most of the *Lakhirajdar* discontented with this measure and refused to pay revenues.

Changes in the Land Tenure Systems

Before 1826, the Ahom rulers of Assam, who ruled over the greater part of Brahmaputra Valley, were satisfied with only poll tax or plough tax. The burden of the taxes on the peasants were not so heavy. The Ahom rulers settled lands with different proprietorship. The community proprietorship was entitled to a group of people or *khel* who were supposed to be the first settlers or cultivated the land first. Revenue was fixed at a very low rate. Sometimes made free. They introduced three types of land settlements viz, joint proprietorship or community ownership under *Khel*, private proprietorship under *paik*, special proprietorship under *Lakhirajdar*. Under the joint proprietorship, the lands were granted to a group of people or *Khel* at a very low rate of revenue. The second settlements were made with the paiks for their personal services rendered to the ruler or *Raja*, along with a revenue free *bari* and *rupit* lands at a very low rate of revenue. In the third type of settlements, the lands were granted on revenue free to the temples and religious and other charitable organisations under *lakhirajdars*. Thus, in Assam, a vast area of lands were granted which were popularly known as *Debottar* (temple land), *Brahmottar* (personal grants to the Brahmins), *Dharmottar* (grants to the religious groups or community). While *Debottar* and *Brahmottar* were revenue free, *Dharmottar* was a half-revenue paying settlement.

In Assam, both the permanent or zamindary and the rayatwary settlements were introduced by the British. The districts of Goalpara and Sylhet were brought under the permanent settlement introduced in 1793 while the rest of Assam or the Brahma-

putra Valley was placed under the rayatwary system in 1886, by the enactment of the Assam Land & Revenue Regulation, 1886. Both these settlements introduced different types of land relationships. As the Act of 1886 defined, three types of different classes of owners of land emerged in Assam province, viz.

(1) Proprietors, including the owners of revenue free estates, fee-simple, waste land grants and permanently settled estates.

(2) Land-holders, including the settlement holders of land held directly from the Government under leases for a period exceeding ten years or who had held for ten years continuously before the Regulation came into force.

(3) Settlement holders other than land holders including persons holding land directly from Government under annual leases or leases the term of which is less than ten years.¹⁰

In the district of Darrang, temporarily settled land tenure system was introduced. Under this system, the land holders, by virtue of the Land and Revenue Regulation, had a permanent, heritable and transferable right for ten years atleast over their lands but their right was inferior to that of the owner of a permanently settled estate in Sylhet and Goalpara.

Tenancy System

In between above mentioned three classes of ownership, there were different classes of rayats in Assam, namely privileged rayat and occupancy rayat.¹¹ By virtue of the Regulation of 1886, a rayat has the 'right to hold land for cultivation by himself or by the members of his family or by servants or labourers, or with the aid of partners and includes also the successor in interest of a person who has acquired such right'. But the conditions as entitled in the Regulation were so defective that the tenants could never acquire or attain the security or privilege to hold his or her proprietary right over a land. A rayat can only attain the status of a privileged rayat, after continuously occupying a land for not less than twenty (20) years. Similarly, to attain the status of an occupancy rayat, it requires a period of twelve years of continuous occupation over a land. Though, later on, the period was reduced to twelve years to be a privileged rayat by the Assam Tenancy Act of 1935, the condition of the rayat did not change. As the land allotments were made by a defective method of 'sale by auction', rayats were subjected to frequent victimization.¹² Colonial tenancy legislation, though aimed to protect the rayats, in practice, helped the feudal methods of exploitation. In fact the worst sufferers were

the rayats, who were forced to live under subsistence, being strangled by huge indebtedness. Most striking feature of the tenancy system was that whenever a tenant had become an *adhiar* or a share cropper under a compelling condition, he is not considered as tenant by the Tenancy Legislation in Assam.

Condition of the Peasantry

Introducing new agrarian system, the British object was to colonise Assam and in fact they succeeded by 1883.¹³ The alien rulers rooted proprietary rights over lands, welcome immigrants for colonising waste land and the industrial sector and in turn helped resulting heavy pressure on the land. It is apparently evident that the new agrarian legislation had completely changed the agrarian relationship and accelerated the rapid growth of pauperisation of the rural masses. The influx of immigration can well be estimated from the settlements made with the immigrants. As Guha has pointed out,

*Within a period of three or four decades up to 1950, altogether 1.4 million acres or 1/5 of the total settled area of the Brahmaputra Valley had been settled with immigrants other than extra-garden labourer.*¹⁴

Acreage of newly settled areas with immigrants other than extra-garden labourers increased from decade to decade. Sir Edward Gait also admitted the pressure exerted upon land by the influx of the population. In his opinion, the frequent enhancement of the land-revenue by the British Government was 'due to the demand for land in a village, as indicated by the density of population and the proportion of settled to total area'¹⁵ The uniformity of revenue assessment at the rate of one rupee per *bigha* (1/3 of an acre) for *basti*, ten *annas* for *rupit* and eight *annas* for *faringati* as made in 1810, was no longer tenable with the new settlement for a period of twenty years in 1905-1918. At this settlement, according to Gait, the average assessment per *bigha* of permanent cultivation varied from 11.5 *annas* in Nowgong district to 14.7 *annas* in Lakhimpur district depending upon the relative productivity of the classified lands (fourfold division of land, viz. 1st class, II class, III class, & IV class).

Basically, with the enhanced assessment of the land revenue, unrest among the peasantry persistently started growing and social tension in the rural areas became a constant feature. Most of the official reports, very often, attempted to undermine the social tension and tried to hide out the fact of the increased land revenue assessment and the resultant unrest among the peasantry. But in the grass root level, the intensity of hardship was very acute and severe.

Krishna Samra, in his diary, gives a vivid picture of the miserable condition of the rayats.¹⁶ With the pattas of lands being granted for 10 (ten) years, 20 (twenty) years and 30 (thirty) years of lease, the rate of land revenue went on increasing. The classification of land was also defective. The Governments' objective to increase the rate of land revenue encouraged them to classify lands even at a time when productivity of the land was considerably declining. Even though if the price of paddy declined, the rate of revenue was not reduced proportionately. Thus, with every land survey, the alien rulers used to increase the rate of land tax without caring or considering for low productivity or constantly reducing yielding. As the peasants could not pay so much of taxes, their arrears went on ever increasing and thereby paved the way for rapid growth of indebtedness and pauperisation. It is obvious that non-realisation of taxes forced the rayat to sell his or her lands at very cheap rate, even house-utensils were not spared. In case of family-marriage and other rituals, to be observed as a social obligation, and to maintain structural continuity, rayats had to run to take loan either from the Zamindar or Mauzadar or money lenders. Of course, it was not a special case for Assam, but a general feature all over India under the colonial rule and also still exists in the country. Under this condition, the cry for a 50% (fifty percent) reduction in land revenue, as Guha pointed out, emerged as an universal demand, echoed and reechoed in hundreds of Congress meetings and rayat sabhas till World War II.¹⁷ Bipan Chandra, too, interprets the condition of the peasantry in a similar way.¹⁸ As he puts,

By 1931, one third of the rural population was landless, most of the remaining two thirds were tenants at will, share croppers and petty-peasant proprietors.

The landlords or the Mauzadars, the village head man and other vested interests always took the opportunity to snatch away the rayat's last hold of land, in the name of helping him, at a lowest rate. The severity of such exploitation is well depicted by Jyotiprakash Agarwalla, the cultural doyen of modern Assam, in his historic epic-play *La-vita*.¹⁹ In her speech (dialogue) to Mauzadarni (wife of the Mauzadar), Lavita says 'not only the colonialists, but along with them, the coloborationists Mauzadars and the village head man (or the local ghosts) are also to be rooted out'. She continues, 'because, have not you taken off our lands at Rs. 17.00 (rupees seventeen) only which was put for auction, for non-payment of revenues? Has not Mauzadar taken Bagiram's cow for his inability to pay revenue of Rs. 4.00 (rupees four)? As my father fell

in dysentery, could not pay the due revenue. Have not you put our hereditary property for last 4 (four) years, to auction ? You and Your English king could not understand anything except revenue'. The statement made by the Royal Agricultural Commission is note worthy to mention here about the miserable condition of the Indian people.²⁰ It comments,

No one desires to witness a continuation of a system under which people are born in debt, live in debt and die in debt, passing on their burden to those who follow.

Emergence of Rayat Sabhas

As the situation went on such, the condition of the peasantry in general, the rayats in particular, became worse. The Indian National Congress which claimed to represent majority of the peoples' aspiration through the national struggle, did not pay much importance to the grievances of the peasantry or their cause except few special cases and therefore, did not emphasise to launch an organised mass-movement against the colonial authority and its agrarian policy. It was basically due to the fact that the Congress party always found their strength in the alliance with the Zamindars or land lords. Hence, the peasants, whose discontent and unrest found expression in the direct confrontation with the land lords as well as the imperialist, were not considered to be the real ally as as a potential force to over throw the alien rule. Gandhi was much responsible for this sectarian policy. In a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, on January 12, 1930, Gandhi wrote,

*In the present state of the Congress, no civil disobedience can or should be offered in its name and it should be offered by me alone or jointly with a few companions.*²¹

Again in a letter to Viceroy on March 2, 1930, Gandhi 'explained that he had to move since otherwise the forces of violence would take over and that he surely would not harm single English man or any of his legitimate interest in India'.²² Thus carefully, Gandhi concealed his intention in the name of non-violence and thereby not only cornered the communists, revolutionaries, but even the Congress Party to launch an organised militant mass-movement. It is also evidently proved that the Congress party was facing internal crisis particularly on the question of pressure-compromise-pressure tactics, being adapted throughout the period of struggle for freedom, with a basic objective of achieving constitutional concession to capture political power. Bipan Chandra has criticized Tilak and Gandhi for their shameless attempt in going back again and again from the demand of complete independen-

dence to dominion status or even less.' Moderate Nationalists on the other hand, 'did not assign an important role to the masses or to mass-struggle in their work.' Opportunism of the elite leadership like Tilak, Gandhi and the other moderate nationalists to keep their own class-interest intact particularly during the years following 1921 after the Chouri-Choura incident in U. P. (1922) when Gandhi called off the non-co-operation mass-struggle which generated so much of mass-militancy, helped to develop organisational weakness within the Congress Party. Even the Congress Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee observed that this weakness resulted in serious set back to the organisational balance in the provincial Congress Committee too.²⁴

The formation of Swarajya party within the Congress, the Congress Socialist Party, the activities of the extremist nationalist groups and individuals evidently show the weakness of the united nationalist movement. Result is that the Congress Party could not take any programme of mass-involvement from 1921 to 1929. Except few local agitations, there was in fact, no such organised national agitation or struggle. The constant pressure exerted by the Communist members within the Congress party to launch an organised mass-struggle also proved to be ineffective. In Assam the non-co-operation movement was of different character. The tea-garden workers for the first time involved in the national movement in a large scale and considerably with different militancy. Labourers of Upper Assam and Surma Valley tea gardens joined en masse and succeeded in turning down the wheel of the British Planters' tea-garden factory for a considerable period. Peasants also joined spontaneously. Emergence of panchayat was a special feature of this movement. The formation of it was a necessary concomitant of the boycott of courts and was taken up in right earnest. Since October 1920 to January 1921, large number of panchayats sprang up all over the country. Many of them worked well, a few proved inefficient.²⁵ But, most unfortunate is that on the suspension of all mass movements after the Chouri-Choura incident by Gandhiji, the generated revolutionary urge of the people was compelled to be frustrated. Of course, keeping hope upon the national leadership, the revolutionary masses had no other alternative but to express their grievances through local agitation. In fact, in this period, the grass-root level masses found their own way to their cause. According to Guha, 'the local agitation', (in Assam) was kept up round questions of

- (1) abolition of the unpopular grazing tax

- (2) prohibition of tax
- (3) reduction of land revenue for giving relief to the peasants whose economic condition had deteriorated after the World War I and
- (4) restriction on immigration of East Bengal (presently Bangladesh) Muslim to Assam.

Hence, popular mass-organisations started to spring up by this time all over Assam on the above issues. Among those, the first three demands are concerned with agrarian problems directly while the fourth one is with demographic problems. Ideologically too, there was difference in the formation of these mass-organisations. Basically, two types of organisations grew up, one was headed by the Assamese middle class consisting of the tea-planters, traders, landlords, lawyers, and other middle classes. They voiced the demand for preserving Assamese identity from the influx of foreigners or immigrant Muslims from erstwhile East Bengal. *Asom Sangrakshini Sabha*, an organisation attached to Congress was formed under the leadership of Ambika Giri Roy Choudhury. Though this organisation claimed to represent all sections of the Assamese people, did not pay importance to the causes of the Assamese peasantry. Result is that almost in all parts of Assam, *Rayat Sabhas* or *Krishak Sabhas* emerged. These sabhas were widely popular among the peasants in general and rayats in particular. The most prominent among these were *Viswanath Rayat Sabha*, *Saring Rayat Sabha*, *Sologiri Rayat Sabha*, *Ganak Puri Rayat Sabha*, and *Naduar Rayat Sabha* and some others. Some of these existed as an independent organisation since sixties of the nineteenth century, while others were formed in the twenties of the twentieth century, at the initiative of the local congress leaders. Early *rayat sabhas*, though locally organised, were quite aware of the happenings outside Assam. They maintained link with the national level. These organisations elected members and arranged to send them as delegates to the Indian National Congress sessions. Satyanath Borah, B.A., of Nowgong Rayat Association was elected delegate to Calcutta session held in 1886; Lakshmikanta Barkakati representing Tezpur rayat sabha, attended Madrass session held in 1887. In 1888, Ghanashyam Barua, a cultivator was sent to Alahabad session to represent Nowgong rayat association. Harendra Narayan Singh Choudhury, Zamindar of Bagribari and a merchant from Shillong, too, were elected as delegates. In 1889, Haridas Roy, a cultivator, from Dibrugarh, attended Bombay session.☛

In Darrang district, it was after 1930, when the British Govern-

ment of India banned Congress and resorted to heavy repression, hundreds of *rayat sabhas* sprang up spontaneously.²⁸ Earlier in Goalpara, *Goalpara Krishak sanmilan* was organised in 1926, later on controlled by the leftists.²⁹ *Rayat sabhas* in Goalpara were very much effective in mobilising people to redressing their grievances basically through agitation.³⁰ *Tezprur rayat sabha* was formed by a group of enlightened people primarily to protest against the enhancement of land-revenue and to ventilate other grievances.³¹ Lakshmidhar Sarmah (1898-1934), a writer and congress worker took active part in organising *rayat sabhas* during 1930-31 all over the *Na-Duar* circle of Darrang extending from the river *Bharali* in the west to Gohpur in the east. At Chai-duar, nearest to Gohpur, Sarmah was arrested on the charge of addressing a meeting with spirited voice.³² Later, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and also Gohon Chandra Goswami took the leadership of *Viswanath rayat sabha*, which became most prominent.³³ In 1939, December, *Mongaldai kishak sanmilan* was held under the leadership of the communists. For the first time, in Darrang, communist led peasants in this *sanmilan* strongly condemned the feudal landlords and the capitalists for their ruthless exploitation. The slogan 'land belongs to him who owns the plough' (*nangal jar mati tar*) was voiced to assert peasants' rights over the land and was echoed in other parts soon. By the end of 1941, the communists succeeded in organising peasants to the agitational path under the banner of red flag.³⁴

Though the organisation was named after *rayat*, it did not represent only *rayat* but the peasantry in general. The basic objective in forming *rayat sabhas* was to raise voices demanding reduction of land-revenue and taxes by 8 (eight) annas per rupee. Guha analysed the background of *rayat sabhas*' emergence and activities in the following lines :

*The rayat sabha movement made most headway in the districts where land revenue had come under re-assessment and especially in Darrang District.*³⁵

Besides basic objective, the *rayat sabhas* took initiative in other constructive works like construction of roads, dams to check flood erosion and also campaigned against the evils of opium eating etc. There was as such no central body to regulate the activities of the *sabhas* at the initial stage. All *sabhas* were independent in conducting and formulating its own programmes. In course of time, *rayat sabhas* felt the need of a central body to regulate and conduct its functions in an organised way. It was at the second annual conference of the *rayat sabhas* of Assam held at Dergaon

(Sibsagar District), presided over by the ex-civil surgeon Sri Hari Das, where a guide line was accepted unanimously. With this conference, a systematic co-ordination with different sabhas along with the guideline could be achieved which helped in guiding it. Since then, the rayat sabhas also directed their objective towards encouragement of education among the illiterate villagers. Several resolutions were also passed by the different rayat sabhas demanding free-grant of bamboos, thatches etc to construct houses, to sanction relief from auction of their land for non-payment of revenues, who did not possess land atleast 25 (twenty five) bighas ($1/3$ acre = 1 bigha), not to allow auction of their houses, cows, bullocks, golden ornaments of the women folk, utensils for non-payment of taxes.³⁶

These resolutions reveal that the *rayat sabhas* were dealing with the manifold problems of the villagers. They had their faith on the doctrine, which declares 'Peoples' are the real king' or *raijei raja*. The *rayat sabhas* held meetings to educate the peasantry, to make them conscious about their miserable conditions, organised large-scale signature campaign in support of their demands and submitted to the colonial authority.

Sponteneity of the masses in taking initiative and organising rayat sabhas had been continuing and getting momentum since sixties of the 19th century. As the basic question of peoples discontent was the re-assessed rate of revenues, and as it affected middle classes too, the later therefore joined and supported the rayat sabha movement against the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation. At Jorhat, in 1886, June, about 10,000 (ten thousand) people gathered on the occasion of the annual conference of *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* and criticised the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation. From almost all rayat sabhas of Assam, protest meetings were held demanding withdrawal of the Regulation. With the initiative of rayat sabhas, memorandums were submitted to the government from Jorhat, Tezpur, Dibrugarh, Nowgong and many other places.³⁷

Rayat Sabhas can well be termed as an extension of *raijmel* (Peoples' Assembly) which were widely popular in Assam and played a historic role in redressing grievances of the peasants. The most prominent of these *raijmel* were Rangia Rajimel and Lachima Rajimel of Kamrup district, Patharughat Rajimel of Mongaldai sub-division during 1893-94.³⁸ Rajimel is an assembly of villagers, comprising several villages (beyond one mauza sometimes) to discuss about their problems and to resolve it by finding out way of redressing their grievances. These *raijmels* expressed their resentment against the colonial agrarian policy and were led by the well-established

respected villagers and religious personalities like *Gosain, Doloi etc.*³⁹

In Darrang district, the first *raijmel* or peoples' assembly was held at Patharughat of Mongaldai sub-division in 1868. In 1894, it turned into a militant mass-organisation and strong resentment outbursted on the question of re-assessment in Assam valley. The villagers, already being subjected to pay enhanced rates of revenue, had been pressed down with heavy arrears and thereby strangled with huge indebtedness. With the introduction of re-assessed rate of revenue, people became furious and assembled spontaneously at Patharughat in January 1894 to discuss about the enhanced taxes. It was decided unanimously in the *raijmel*, 'not to pay the re-assessed rates of revenue'. Being informed of this assembly, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang rushed to Patharughat and stationed at the inspection bungalow, with an armed force of 12 (twelve) military police and 19 (nineteen) policemen to control the situation. People in large numbers gathered at the inspection bungalow to express their miserable conditions and their inability to pay the enhanced rate of tax. The Deputy Commissioner, instead of listening their case, ordered police to disperse the crowd forcibly. The action of the police turned the situation into an open battle in between the angry unarmed masses and the armed forces. The armed forces resorted to firing killing and wounding more than one hundred poor rayats. The official sources admitted that 15 (fifteen) men were killed and 37 (thirty seven) were wounded in firing.⁴⁰ People of Darrang thus showed their first historic resentment organisedly against the alien rule in Assam.⁴¹

Raijmel and the *rayat sabha*, both were anti-imperialist in their objective. But so far the composition and the leaderships are concerned there was little difference. While the *raijmels* were heterogeneous assembly of the villagers, *rayat sabhas* were more or less composed primarily of the lower-strata of the peasantry. Hence, these were class-organisations. *Raijmels* were conducted by the feudal gentry while the *rayat sabhas* were led by the middle class elites and in most cases these were under the rayats' leadership.

Changes in the character of leadership can be explained in the broad background of changes in the social structure. As soon as the colonial agrarian policy rooted firmly and the feudal gentry and other influential village personalities were placed either as *Mauzadars* or *Choudhuris* or *Gaon-burrah* (village head men), they became ally of the colonial rule. They were no longer interested to involve themselves with the peasants' problems, as they were not affected any more. Assamese middle class, who involved them-

elves with the *rayat-sabha* movement deeply in the eighties of the 19th century, gradually declined to keep touch with it. They were cautious about the militant trend of the mass upsurge. Hence, they attempted in all respects to confine the agitation under the moderate politics. With the coming of the influx problem, Assamese middle class (intelligentsia) brought forward the question of Assamese identity and also the protection of the service security of them. Thereby, Assamese middle class had attempted to divert the attention of the masses from the issue of enhanced rate of revenues to the preservation of Assamese identity. *Asom Sangrakshani Sabha*, a middle class organisation, took the issue of influx. With the dominance of the middle class elite over the *rayat-sabhas*, *rayat sabha movement* was influenced by regionalism. But as soon as it merged into the Assam Provincial Congress Committee in 1921, regionalism was pushed back for the time being by the spirit of nationalism. *Rayat sabhas* too, could regain its former spirit of anti-colonial anti-feudal and anti-capitalist character. By the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, *rayat sabha* directed its objective also to be an anti-feudal and an anti-capitalist. Changes in the strategy was due to the increased rate of feudal exploitation and the rapid rise in the price of essential commodities due to the post war situation and basically for the impact of 1929 economic depression.

To sum up, it is apparently clear that *rayat sabhas* played a significant role in mobilising peasants exclusively against the agrarian policy and the agrarian exploitation conducted by the imperialist, the feudal landlords, the money lenders, the traders and other vested interests. It helped to grow national consciousness or awareness about the alien rule among the masses in the early part of the national struggle for freedom. In spite of the moderate politics, the intensity and militancy of the anti-imperialist non-compromising spirit of the masses went on increasing. It found expression in the numerous uninterrupted peasant-upsurges all over. Most important features of it can be examined during the 1942 movement. It is admitted by almost all national congress leaders that the '42 struggle was a leaderless struggle. But the intensity of the struggle surpassed all previous records. Masses of India never showed such heroic role in conducting the Quit-India resolution as well as in facing the brutal repression resorted to by the alien rulers. Had there been no active participation of the masses and their heroic sacrifice to carry out the slogan *do-or die*, the movement would not have attained such an intensive character. Even the Government report entitled 'Congress Responsibility for the distur-

bances, 1942-43' reveals that the former completely got lost.

The importance of the 1942 struggle lies in its militancy and in capacity to involve the peasantry in many areas. In the rural areas it was acute and intense beyond measure. The intensive character of the movement left its footmarks in Assam, particularly in Barpeta, Dhekiajuli, Gohpur, Teok, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Barjari, Sootea, Bahjani, Barjalu, Hatisung, Roha, Jamuguri, Dhakuakana, Puranigodam and Kaliabor areas ; most of these being located in Central Assam. People of these areas not only paralysed local governments but also set up village panchayats to act as the lowest units of the administrative system of a parallel government ; which though short-lived, lasted for a considerable time. The basic factors behind large participation of the masses lie in the economic hardships due to feudal as well as colonial exploitation, which were intensified during the inter-war devastations. Another striking feature of it is the spontaneous emergence of the local (grass-root) leadership and their successful conduct of the purposes. Had there been no previous experience, the peasants would not have successfully emerged as leaders and conducted their role. It would not be inconsiderable and irrelevant to examine in the light of rayat sabha movement which provided them way to acquire political experience. Another important feature of this movement is the large scale participation of women, mostly from the village women folk. They heroically faced the armed repression and enlisted them in the list of martyrs, the great souls of mother India. Almost all of them were peasants among which most prominent were Kanaklata Devi Baruah of Barangabari, Tileswari Baruah, Kumali Devi and Khaluli Nath of Naharbari Mouza, Padumi Devi of Dhekiajuli, Bhogeswari Phukanani of Barhampur, Nowgong district.

Thus the rayat sabhas had played its anti-colonial, anti-feudal and anti-capitalist role keeping continuity in its strategy through out the period of struggle for freedom in India.

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