

Revolt of Nawab Radharam (1786)*

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Radharam Datta was a zamindar of the Chargola area in modern Karimganj district in South Assam. The area covered in the present district of Karimganj was included in the Silhat sircar of the Mughals and the Sylhet district of the British till 1947, while Chargola (a part of medieval Pratapgarh state) was a small frontier estate in the tri-juncture of Sylhet, Tripura and the Mizo (Lushai) Hills at the time of rise the British power in Bengal. Radharam, a powerful but at the same time a cruel and oppressive chieftain, was called a 'Nawab', as he ruled in his territory more or less autonomously. The stories of his bravery as well as highhandedness are told in the villages till our own days in tales and lores. With the grant of the *Diwani* of Bengal by the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II, on 12th August 1765, the whole of Bengal, which then included Sylhet, passed to the control of the East India Company, but Nawab Radharam refused to accept the authority of the Company and resisted the British pressure to pay taxes for many years. The Sylhet administration, under Robert Lindsay, the Collector, established a police outpost in Chargola, primarily to exert pressure on this stubborn chief. Anticipating an eminent military remonstrance from the authorities of Sylhet, Radharam attacked the British outpost in Chagola in 1786, and completely demolished it. On the site of the outpost, he raised a fort and stationed a section of his Kuki scouts in that fort. This signaled an open war, which lasted for few months, as Radharam and his Kuki adherents resorted to surprises and ambushes, besides a 'naval encounter' in the Shonbeel (*beel* = a lake or a fen). This event is locally known as *Radharamer Vidroho* (or Revolt of Radharam). The British forces eventually captured Radharam when he was on a pilgrimage to *Baruni Mela* at Siddheswar (Badarpurghat). He was put in an 'iron-cage' and taken to Sylhet jail. The popular story is that Radharam had been put to death in Sylhet Jail, although the British official version was that Radharam committed suicide on way to the jail. Nevertheless, this 'Chargola Rising of 1786' under Nawab Radharam must have been one of the earliest anti-British revolts in Northeast India and it deserves to be charted appropriately in the annals of anti-colonial/ anti-imperialist struggles in the region.

Methodology

The source materials for the revolt of Radharam are extremely limited both in volume and in nature, although Radharam remains a legendary character in the Barak-Surma Valley. His heroic fight against British expansionism as well as the story of his rise to chiefship and his oppressive conduct and cruelties are recorded in innumerable folktales and folksongs, a number of which have been documented by Pandit Achyuta Charan Choudhury Tattvanidhi.¹ However, for the British version of the story, a researcher is generally expected to look for archival records. On the other hand, the events in those years of transition, particularly in respect of the remote and frontier areas, were not adequately recorded. The practice of maintaining records and preserving them in official record rooms and archives, though a very significant contribution of the British in India that facilitated the writings of the history of the modern period, started in systematic manner much after 1780s as the East India Company's administration was till then yet to fully consolidate its position in Bengal. Moreover, Radharam's territory was located in a distant frontier of Bengal and, therefore, might not have received enough attention of the Company's headquarters. Nevertheless, a search in the manuscript series in the Bengal Archives and the India Office Records, particularly the pre-1874 files relating to the Sylhet area in the Assam Archives, which were received from the Dacca Board, may be rewarding. In fact, we came across a number of files in the Assam Secretariat Records (earlier at Shillong) under the Board of Revenue papers, which by implications can be related to Radharam and his resistance to the payment of taxes for the Chargola estate. There are also some documents published in Firminger's collection of the *Sylhet District Records*² that are related to this revolt. It is indeed surprising to note that the event, which took place during the tenure of Robert Lindsay as the Collector and Magistrate of Sylhet, found no reference in Lindsay's memoir.³ Of course, Lindsay's memoir dealt mainly with his business, particularly his lime (*chunam*) trade with the Khasis, while the administrative or political matters hardly found any mention in his book. Nevertheless, the story of the revolt has been mentioned, although in a very sketchy manner, in B C Allen's *Assam District Gazetteers*.⁴ We also come across some elaborate discussions on Radharam and his revolt, in connection with the history of the Pratapgarh state, in *Srihatter Itivritta* by Pandit Achyuta Charan Choudhury Tattvanidhi.⁵

Choudhury's information is based mostly on the local sources, and the author made liberal use of the literary sources, folktales and folksongs in his work. In a recent publication on the history of freedom movement in the Barak-Surma Valley, *Swadhinata Sangrame Srihatta-Cachar* by Nishit Ranjan Das, Nawab Radharam has been projected as a freedom fighter.⁶ There are also other publications in which the story of the hero has been recalled. In fact, Radharam is still a glorified personality in the valley and he is remembered in various contexts. In this paper an attempt is made to briefly reconstruct the history of the Revolt of Nawab Radharam in 1786 in the context of local resistance to the British colonial expansion in Northeast India.

Radharam and his estate

Radharam Datta was the son of Rajaram Datta of Village Taltala in Sylhet. On the advice of a wandering holyman (*sannyasin*), he went to Chargola, a forested part of the erstwhile Pratapgarh state, which was earlier a tributary to the Tripura kings but became a *mahal* within the *sircar Silhat* of *Subeh Bangala* under the Mughals after the latter had occupied Sylhet during the reign of Emperor Akbar. Todarmal had introduced the new land revenue settlement in the district. Radharam was then very young in age, but he was brave and adventurous by nature. He started a trade mart and a shop of essential commodities and also conducted *khedah* operations for catching elephants. In fact, he made his fortune by supplying elephants and *agar* wood to Bengal. The Mughal authority was then declining in Bengal, and the Nawab of Murshidabad hardly exercised any control over this distant frontier region. Radharam reclaimed the abandoned and forested Chargola area and settled a large number of cultivators as his tenants. He visited the king of Tripura and obtained the lease of a large tract of land in the vicinity of Chargola, over which the ruler of Tripura had actually lost control for a long time. Radharam supplied provisions from his stores on credit to Golam Ali Choudhury, the Zamindar of the Pratapgarh estate, and also advanced him money from time to time. When the amount of debt accumulated and the Zamindar was unable to repay, Radharam obtained the possession of a large portion of Pratapgarh against the debt. After the death of Golam Ali Choudhury, the Pratapgarh estate was equally divided between Golamraja Choudhury, son of Golam Ali Choudhury, and Radharam Datta by way of settlement of the debts of

the deceased. In the meantime, Radharam had cultivated friendly relations with the Kuki chiefs in the neighbouring hills by supplying them provisions on credit and employing their people as porters and in elephant catching and collection of agar wood. These friendly relations eventually resulted in the extension of Radharam's sphere of influence or control over a large number of Kuki clans and villages (*punji*). He had also raised an armed militia with the Kuki recruits and appointed his second son, Ranamangal, as the commander (*Senapati*) of the militia. He also owned some boats and vassals, which he used for the trading purposes. These vassals used to be anchored in the Shonbeel, a large natural lake or fen, a part of which was within the territory of Radharam. The fen had an outlet to the Surma river through a local stream, and it used to become turbulent during the monsoons. Radharam came to be referred to as 'Nawab' and he ruled over his territory like an independent chief.

Colonial Intervention

When East India Company ascended the *diwani* of Bengal, including Sylhet, on 12th August 1765, all the estate holders in the Sylhet district were required to register themselves as Zamindars, first under annual settlement, then under five-years settlement, followed by the ten-years settlement, and finally, the permanent settlement. Golamraja Choudhury also registered his portion of Pratapgarh as a Zamindari under the East India Company. But Radharam refused to comply with the orders of the government and declared himself as the independent ruler (*Nawab*) of Chargola, which was by then extended into a considerably large estate by absorbing a portion of Pratapgarh and another large tract of land that Radharam had obtained on lease from the King of Tripura. Although advanced in age, Radharam was determined not to submit to the authority of the East India Company, and he resisted the pressure from first three Collectors of Sylhet, namely, Thakeray, Sumner and Holland. However, the fourth Collector, Robert Lindsay (1776-88), exerted pressure on Radharam when he got a complaint from Golamraja Choudhury of Pratapgarh that Radharam had been enraged by the loyalty of the former to the government and he was using his Kuki militia to encroach upon Pratapgarh with a motive to gradually dislodge the Zamindar from his estate. The Collector received similar complaints about the highhandedness of Radharam from other Zamindars in the area also, including Kanuram Choudhury, the Zamindar of Moina. To keep Radharam under control by

exerting pressure on him, the British authorities established a police outpost in Chargola, on the border of Radharam's territory.

The Revolt

Radharam could see the motive behind establishing the outpost. He also suspected that his neighbours, Golamraja Choudhury, Zamindar of Pratapgarh, and Kanuram Choudhury, Zamindar of Moina, were in league with the Company's officials. Therefore, he wanted to keep the British authority at a distance from his sphere of influence. With this objective, in 1786, within few months of the establishment of the Chargola outpost, Radharam attacked the outpost, demolished it and killed all its inmates. He then constructed a fort on the same site and stationed a section of his Kuki militia in the fort. The British then stationed a war-boat in Shonbeel, but Radharam attacked and drowned the boat. All the sepoys in the boat were killed. The second expedition, which closely followed, also failed to achieve its objective, as the vassal was caught in a storm in the *beel*. The Collector then sent a fleet of war-boats with the instructions to attack and occupy Chargola. Radharam's vassals were already waiting in the Shonbeel, and the encounter, which followed, is said to have continued for seven to ten days. In the meantime, the Company's foot soldiers also attacked Chargola from another direction. Radharam's second son and commander, Ranamangal, died in the encounter and his militiamen began to run helter-skelter. The British forces occupied Chargola. Radharam managed to escape, but his three other sons, namely, Jaymangal, Birmangal and Rajmangal, were caught while running in the forest and they were eventually taken to the Sylhet Jail.⁹

While discussing the occupation of Chargola, B C Allen remarked,¹⁰

... in 1876, one Radharam, a Zamindar on the eastern frontier of the district, attacked the Chargola thana, with a following of Kukis, and killed and harried the villagers. Mr Lindsay promptly dispatched some sepoys to the place with the instructions to burn the villages of Radha Ram's people, and to lift his cattle; and in a very short time the Zamindar himself was seized. The letter that reports his capture to Mr (afterwards Sir) John Shore curtly announces the annoying fact that a tribe of hillmen had surprised the thanah of Laur, killed the Thanadar

and twenty of his men, and made their way back into their mountain fastness. During the declining days of Mughal rule the administration had been lax, and it was some years before the people learned the authority of the Company could not be set at defiance with impunity. The fact that at this time there were neither criminal nor civil courts in Sylhet is also said to be a source of difficulty.

Aftermath of the Revolt

After the British occupation of Chargola, Radharam had evaded arrest for few months, but he was ultimately apprehended. The authorities gathered from the informers that he goes for the annual *barunsnan* (holy bath) in Siddheswar every year, and therefore, he was expected not to miss the next festival (March 1787). They waited for that ceremonial occasion. The *Baruni Mela* (bathing festival) is a very old annual festival in the Siddheswarghat, where thousands of pilgrims used to take holy deep and visit the *mela* every year.¹¹ In the meantime, the government had made all preparations for the arrest of Radharam, in case he turns up for the bath. As expected, Radharam went to take the deep in the disguise of a *Sadhu*. He had in the meantime grown enough beard and long hair. But while taking bath he was identified by one of the informers who were hired by the British officials. The armed sepoys, who were hiding at a distance for the whistle, immediately cordoned the *ghat*. Radharam was caught and put in an iron-cage, which was also made to his size and kept ready. According to the official version Radharam killed himself on his way to the jail, but there was a strong rumour that he was killed in the police custody in Sylhet Jail. After the death of Radharam the officials negotiated with the sons of Radharam, namely, Jaymangal, Birmangal and Rajmangal, who were already in police custody, and persuaded them to submit to the authority of the British Government. The eldest, Jaymangal was then recognized as the Zamindar of Chargola, although the estate was registered as three separate *taluks* in the names of the three brothers (nos. 79, 80 and 81 in the district of Sylhet).¹² This was the end of the autonomy of the tiny principality of Chargola. The descendants of Radharam had become small Zamindars under the government of the East India Company and the estate was permanently settled as per the land revenue system introduced by Lord Cornwallis in Bengal.

Resume

The researchers may do well in their efforts to study the Revolt of Radharam Datta in the general context of anti-imperialist struggles or popular resistance to British expansion in the second half of the 18th century. Bipan Chandra and his co-authors, who described the Revolt of 1857 as the 'First Major Challenge' to the British imperialism in India, stated that the Revolt was "the culmination of a century long tradition of fierce popular resistance to British domination."¹³ They further said, "The series of civil rebellions, which run like a thread through the first 100 years of British rule, were often led by deposed *raj*as and *nawabs* or their descendants, uprooted and impoverished *Zamindars*, landlords and *poligars* (landed military magnates in South India), and ex-retainers and officials of the conquered Indian states. The backbone of the rebellions, their mass base and striking power came from the rack-rented peasants, ruined artisans and demobilized soldiers."¹⁴ They also noted that "from 1763 to 1856, there were more than forty major rebellions apart hundreds of minor ones."¹⁵ However, the 'civil rebellions and tribal uprisings', listed and discussed by Bipan Chandra and his colleagues did not include a single event from the Northeast. On the other hand, Alexander Mackenzie and many other historians have discussed the series of tribal uprisings and wars of resistance in the 'Northeast Frontier of Bengal' during the period between the battle of Plassey (1757) and the Revolt of 1857, which were essentially aimed at keeping the British authority at a distance.¹⁶ Radharam's revolt was of a different nature as his actual intention might have been to avoid the payment of taxes to the government, to conceal his assets and sources of income, or not to allow any external authority to intervene in the internal affairs of his estate, but its anti-imperialist content is abundantly clear. Although Bengal had passed under the control of the East India Company, this chief of a small frontier principality refused to accept the authority of the Company and offered a prolonged armed resistance to the extent it was possible on his part as the ruler of a small territory in the extreme northeast frontier of Bengal. He perished in course of the resistance. Nevertheless, his revolt deserves to be recognized in history as one of the earliest revolts against British imperialism in Northeast India.

Notes and References

- * The author is thankful to SAP-DRS (UGC), Department of History, NEHU, Shillong for extending facilities for preparation of the paper.
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 2. W K Firminger, *Sylhet District Records*, 4 vols, Shillong, 1913-19
 3. Robert Lindsay, *Anecdotes of an Indian Life*, London, 1849 (as Vol. III of the *Lives of Lindsays*), reprinted with an introduction by D R Syiemlieh, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 1997
 4. B C Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. ii (Sylhet), Calcutta, 1905
 5. *Srihatter Itivritta*, pp. 423-37
 6. Nishit Ranjan Das, *Swadhinata Sangrame Srihatta-Cachar*, Silchar, 2005
 7. *Srihatter Itivritta*, pp. 431-32
 8. *ibid*: W K Firminger, *Sylhet District Records*, vol. I, pp. 123-27;39-43; Assam Secretariat Records (ASR), Pre - 1874 files and bundles received from the Government of Bengal (Board of Revenue Papers), File no. 26 of 1778; no. 4 of 1781; no. 10 of 1782; no. 12 of 1783;; no. 14 of 1784
 9. *ibid*: ASR, Pre-1874 files and bundles received from the Government of Bengal, File no. 16 of 1786; no. 17 of 1787; K N Dutta (comp.& ed.), *A Handbook of the Old Records of the Assam Secretariat*, The Assam Government Press, Shillong, 1959, pp. 329—83
 10. B C Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, vil. ii (Sylhet), pp. 41-42
 11. "Another fair, which lasts for one day only, is held at Siddheswar on the 18th or 19th March, and is attended by total gathering of not more than 3000 people, the trade carried on being in nearly the same articles as at the same fair.....A religious gathering takes place at the same time as the fair at Siddheswar, on the 18th or 19th March, on the occasion of the great bathing festival. This is held on one bank of the river, while the fair takes place on the opposite side. It is attended by people from Sylhet and other neighbouring districts. The total number which assemble is estimated to be between two and three thousand souls." W W Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam*, vol. ii, London, 1879, p. 467

12. ASR, Pre-1874 files and bundles received from the Government of Bengal, File no. 34 of 1789; no. 43 of 1790; no. 47 of 1791; no. 53 of 1792; *Srihatter Itivritta*, op.cit
13. Bipan Chandra et al, *India's Struggle for Independence*, Viking, 1988, p. 41
14. *ibid*
15. *ibid*, p. 43
16. Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884; H K Barpujari, *Problem of Hill Tribes : North East Frontier*, 3 vols, Gauhati 1970-78; J B Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English*, New Delhi, 1977, for example.