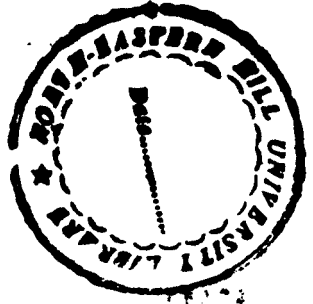


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**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

FIFTH SESSION

AIZAWL : 1984

PREFACE

It gives me great pleasure to place on record that the North-East India History association has been able to maintain its tradition of holding the annual sessions and publishing the proceedings volume of every session before the next session without any interruption. Within the first five years of its existence the Association has enlisted members not only from every research oriented institutions of higher education that are spread over the north-eastern region but also those scholars from outside the region who have been doing some research on this region. In five years our membership has increased at least ten times. Our emphasis is on scientific historiography which involves an inter-disciplinary approach to a given historical problem, in the specific context of the north-eastern region of India. The membership pattern of the Association is also representative of the various Social Science and inter-related academic disciplines.

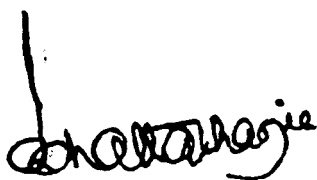
The objective of the Association has seen to encourage and promote research in the history of the region and the adjoining areas historically connected with it. We take some pride in our success on that count. The Association has been able to inspire research inside and outside its own forum. In every session so far, we have come across some scholars who presented their maiden papers. The studies presented in our sessions cover wide-ranging problems, including the issues that are currently confronting the life in the region. The research presented in the sessions have been followed up by the scholars themselves or by others in various forums and publications.

Our commitment has seen our strength. Otherwise, we have been working under several constraints, the most formidable being the problem of finance. The publication cost these days is indeed prohibitive for a non-official research organisation of this nature. And yet, we are required to publish our proceeding volumes out of our own resources. We are nevertheless, hopeful that the social relevance of our works shall some day be appreciated and some funding agency shall come forward to support our efforts. Till then, we shall take pride in the recognition of the academic contents of our works and continue to sustain all by ourselves.

This volume contains the papers that were presented at the Fifth Annual Session of the Association held at the Pachhunga University College, Aizawl on December 18-20, 1984. Professor

Sanat Bose, Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta presided over the session. Pu Saingenga, Principal, Pachhunga University College did us a great honour as Local Secretary of the session which was inaugurated by Shri Lalkhama, Chief Secretary to the government of Mizoram.

We are grateful to the authorities of the Pachhunga University College, its dynamic principal and the members of the History faculty for inviting the session and making the stay of the delegates so comfortable and so meaningful. The teachers and students of the college worked incessantly for the success of the session. This first ever academic gathering of this nature in Mizoram is indeed a milestone in the History of historical research in the region.



(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

Shillong
The 25th July, 1985

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Peoples' Raj in Assam : A Study of Socio-Economic Roots

Sabhas Saha

The study of the history of mass-resistance against the unjust rule of the dominant class and power has been given much importance in the recent years which has provided wider scope in re-orienting historiography in its true historical perspective. This paper intends to study the role of the mass-resistances in Assam with special reference to the 'Central Assam' consisting mainly of the districts of Darrang and Nowgong during 1942 struggle, leading to the establishment of parallel government. The study is based on both the primary and secondary sources with an emphasis precisely on the sociological studies involving area studies, extensive discussion and interviews with the village people who were involved in the movement.

The spirit of mass-resistance is an inherent urge of the working masses, whatever might be its form of action either spontaneous or organised. In India, too, the history of the freedom struggle reveals innumerable mass-resistances ; in most cases, with an aim to establish 'People Raj' in place of British Raj and in some cases, masses came out victoriously by establishing parallel government paralysing local administrative units. In all the cases, it is evidently revealed that the masses had their earnest and genuine aims and objects to form a 'welfare state' where the state will be of the people, for the people and by the people in its real sense.

Throughout the 19th century, there had been numerous peasants struggles against the Alien Rule in Assam. In every cases, the peace-loving masses were forced to resort to armed resistances to the repressive action of the dominant class and the power.¹ It is evidently revealed that the grass-root level mass-organisations like the *Rajmel* (Assembly of Villagers) and the *Rayat Sabhas* spearheaded the resistance struggles. All

these struggles were involved with the problems originated from the newly introduced agrarian policy and the system in Indian soil by the Alien Rule ; resulting complete break down of the traditional self-sufficient village economy and forcing the masses to live under starved conditions. The most destructive measure of the Alien Rule in Indian agrarian economy was their policy of introducing cash revenue in place of revenue in kinds and its restless attempt to realise cash revenue, even at the cost of the mass's life. The most striking features of such resistances in Assam is that while other parts of our country witnessed mass-struggles particularly against the grass-root dominant classes like money-lenders, zamindars, in Assam, its character was *peasant vs state*² as Monorama Sarmah termed it. This special feature of mass-resistances in Assam was due particularly to the absence of intermediary groups in the agrarian economy and also due to the existence of *Khel* or *Mel* systems since the Ahom period, to represent village organisations based on unity and struggle which Mrs. Sarmah termed as *Clan-Unity*. In spite of the rapid changes in the agrarian structure as well as the divisive policies of the foreign rule to break up the village organisation, this *Clan-Unity* had been continued, which reflected in the unprecedented grass-root organisation like *Raijmel* in the 19th Century and the *rayat sabha* till the 20th Century.³

Both the mass-organisations, *Raijmels* and the *Rayat sabhas* were dealing with manifold problems of the villagers ; besides their basic object to reduce the enhanced rates of revenue. They had their faith on the doctrine *Raijei Raja*, which means peoples' are the real king for the power lies with the masses.

The tradition of grass-root organisation and its active assertion in mobilizing the masses into the mass-resistances to redress their socio-economic political grievances against the Alien Rule had its effective continuation till 1947 and were reflected more militantly during the 1942 struggle.

The grass-roots of nationalism in Assam had been prominently growing since the middle of the 19th century. The various organisations, both traditional and modern at the grass-root level played historic role in educating, mobilizing and also bringing out the masses into the path of socio-economic and political agitation leading to the final growth of political consciousness. The study reveals that the mobilization so far

been made in Assam throughout the period, particularly in the districts of Darrang and Nowgong, was made horizontal, instead of vertical as in the case of national level.

Quit-India Movement in the Brahmaputra Valley

The involvement of the people of Assam, particularly of the districts of Darrang and Nowgong, during the Quit India Movement is significantly notable. Masses plunged into the stir spontaneously in response to the national call. Facing all sorts of oppressive measures, even death, the masses of these districts laid their dedicated life for the cause of national independence. The chronology of the movement reveals three phases, so far the nature of the stir was concerned. In the first phase, the movement started as usual peacefully ; taking out of the protest rallies ; shouting slogans, attempts to hoist Congress flags in all the Congress offices etc. This phase continued till the third week of August 1942. In this phase, a large scale campaign programme was conducted to educate the masses, on the strategy and tactics of non-violent movement. The most striking second phase started at the violent reaction of the government. Disobeying non-violent principles, a group of revolutionary youths went underground and indulged in attacking government buildings, damaging means of communication to stop military movements. Soon, this types of revolutionary activities were confined to the sabotage programme, secretly in isolation of the masses. Result was that the revolutionary activities were turned into terrorism, arousing mass confusion, frustration and inviting heavy police oppression upon the masses. The third phase started around September. Soon after the masses being recovered from their frustration and leaderlessness dilemma, asserted their own revolutionary resistance. On 20 September, 1942, it was decided to hoist tri-colour in all the administrative units and districts offices. Having taken all sorts of necessary preparations, several large peaceful processions were organised at Gohpur, Dhekiajuli, Sootea, Jamuguri, Berhampur, Hatisung, Puranigodam and many other places paralysing local administrative units.

Paralysation of the Local Administration

The most striking feature of this phase was the establishment of parallel govt. in many places. The structure and function of the parallel government was unique in character, though

the parallel government or the *Peoples' Raj* lasted for a shorter period, had its unprecedented historical significance. It laid the basis of *Panchayati Raj* system in our soil.

Organisation of the Parallel Government

The organisation of the *Peoples' Raj* though was not well planned, yet, its infra-structure had its firm roots in the traditional organisations based on *Namghar* and *Raijmel*. It had its three administrative divisions viz. judicial, defence and struggle. The Judicial administration was most democratically organised with its hierarchy of powers and functions from the grass-root *gaons* (villages) to the (local) *zilla* levels. The *gaon panchayats* were established in all villages which acted as the grass-root units of the judicial administration. *Mauza Panchayats* were formed above the *gaon panchayats* consisting of *gaons* under one *mauza*. The local or central *panchayats* which had its power at the *Zilla* or district level covering all *mauzas* under the 'local' areas.⁴

The defence organisation was nothing but a militant youth organisation (a para military civil force) formed at the block level which was named *Block Shakti Sena*, having a sectional *Shakti Sena*, at the village level headed by a Sectional Commander and an Assistant Commander. The *Sena* was composed of all the healthy and the daring youths of the area. There was a regular system of training with strong discipline along with an object to defend the village.

Besides the judiciary as well as the defence organisation, the masses formed two wings of the defence to carry out the struggle ahead. *Mrityobahini* and *Muktibahini* were the two organisations having its object to get the masses organised and to fight for the revolt and struggle for freedom.⁵ In fact, the *Mrityobahini* consisting of militant youths was organised throughout the state in view of the growing weaknesses in the *Shakti Sena*.

Under heavy repression, masses were directed to observe various socio-religious functions to get organised avoiding constraint of being assembled politically. Thus since September, 1942, there started observance of Gandhi-Jayanti with traditional rituals and prayers in the *Namghar* along with the shouting slogans of *Bande-Mataram* throughout the State. With the coming of the dawn on 2nd October, the birth day of Gandhi was observed with much festive mood and enthusiasm.

The shouting of slogans and the assembly of the masses once again revived their revolutionary zeal. At Morigaon, after the prayer, a group of twelve militant youths of *Mrityobahini* demonstrated in front of the thana, with whom a large number of masses joined later on. A total number of twenty militant youths were arrested under mass resistance and sent to Nowgong Court and thereafter put behind the bar.

On the same day, a long procession was carried out from Puranigodam Sutapani gaon to the Nowgong town on which the armed police forces let loose an inhuman lathi charge. In protest against this lathi-charge, great upsurges broke out at Barpujia, Charaibahi, Bhakatgaon, Kapalasera, Jajari, Hatisung, Hati-garh, Kampur, Jagi, Na-nai, Po-fani and Berhampur areas.⁶

The upsurges were so intensive that the government took all inhuman measures to curb it by releasing a brutal repressive campaign throughout Nowgong district.

Socio-economic roots of the Peoples' Raj

The study of socio-economic roots of 'Peoples' Raj' calls attention to have a fresh look on the two broad historical perspectives which prevailed specifically in Assam during the period since 1939. These were :

- 1) Growing tide of famine in all the districts of Assam, particularly in Kamrup and Nowgong, resulted from economic depression and the indifferent attitude of the Government.
- 2) Immediate inspiration of the Workers'-Students' movement of 1939 and 1942.

Making Assam an Eastern Base of the Allied Forces but its defeat at the hands of the Japanese Axis-powers not only worsened the situation in Assam but the consequent influx of evacuees from Malayasia and Manipur added a new crisis. There resulted an acute food shortage. The prices of the essential commodities rose to an unbearable extent. Salt, the most essential food item of the Indian masses was taken out of the market. Its price rose to Rupees five (Rs. 5.00) per seer.⁷ This crisis was purely artificial due to the inadequate government policy and also due to the role of the black marketeers. Side by side, the unnatural weather provided a natural threat to the agricultural community.⁸ The flood of letters to the editors shows that how the condition of the peasant masses deteriorated and the situation turned around the

possibility of breaking out of famine. In Dhemaji of Lakhimpur district, the drought completely frustrated the growth of winter crops resulting in an acute food shortage as a result of which most of the family had to live without food.⁹ In its issue of 23 September, 1939, *Sadiniya Asamiya* reported that about sixty to eighty percent families under the Dharampur khetri and Pakua Mauza had been starving completely under foodless conditions.¹⁰

The districts of Darrang and Nowgong were affected hard. The prices of essential commodities in Mongaldai sub-division was artificially raised to such an extent that rice moved out of the village. The profiteers had sold these outside the village. Consequently, about eighty percent families of the area started starving.¹¹ At Jajari under Nowgong district, masses were already crippled with the fear of famine.

Under such conditions the installation of Saadulla Ministry and its role in the name of defending the country under the plea of Japanese threat was undoubtedly criticisable as the former completely neglected the peoples case. The Ministry, instead of giving relief, allowed the tea-planters and the Mauzadars to sell prohibited opium,¹² and to accelerate their attempt to collect revenues from the famine-stricken masses forcibly.¹³

Masses under the *Rayat Sabhas* strongly protested against such attempt of the Mazuadars and demanded reduction of the rate of revenues under new critical situation. The local news papers reported that the poverty stricken masses under the leadership of *rayat-sabhas* of different districts held protest meetings and adopted resolutions demanding the government to take necessary measures immediately. But the mass-reaction failed to move the Saadulla's Ministry. Although, the government took some measures like the introduction of D. I. R. (article 81 ; section 2) to control the rising prices of the essential commodities, it had produced little effect.¹⁴ In reaction to this measure, a section of the business community started closing their shops to make the situation more critical. In an editorial, the *Sadiniya Asamiya* strongly criticised such anti-people arbitrary action by a section of the business community.¹⁵

Strong mass-reaction and their grievances were echoed in the Assembly floor. There was a strong demand of revision of the Assam Land Revenue Act. Introducing an amendment bill, Sri Gourikanta Talukdar, M. L. A., strongly criticised the

disparity of the said Act in fixing the rate of revenues in the two valleys (Brahmaputra and Surma Valley). In support of this view, Talukdar argued that the Act provided no uniform rate of revenues. While in the Surma Valley, the rate of revenue per *bigha per patta* was fixed at half rupee, in the Brahmaputra Valley it was Rupee one. But the Saadulla Ministry rejected the bill.¹⁵

Under such an aggrieved situation two major incidents gave vent to the hard hit masses leading to the emergence of an unprecedented revolutionary ferment which stirred the bewildered people.

Digboi Oil Company Workers' Strike

The strike of the workers in the Digboi Oil Company since 18 April, 1939, for more than five months is not only important and remarkable in the history of freedom struggle but also significant in the history of the Trade Union Movement in Assam as the strike started to secure trade-union rights against which the White (British) owners reacted violently leading to the death of three workers (Praneswar Choudhury, Satyen Chakravarty and Chandra Ahir) at the military firing.¹⁷

It is reported that on April 18, at about 9 p. m., a section of the European employees with a good number of military sepoy went to the *Mazdoor basti* (labour line) to catch hold of them but got strong resistance from the volunteers of the labour union. The resistance successfully pushed back the European invaders. On way of retreat, the military sepoy opened fire killing three workers instantly.¹⁸ The news of the death of three workers spread immediately all around. Protest and public grievances outbursted like a wildfire. Reacting strongly, in support of the Digboi Workers' strike, the workers of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and the workers of the Dibrugarh Railway Headquarters went on strike.

The APCC delegates under the leadership of Amiya Kumar Das, Lakhyeswar Baruah, both M. L. A., Rajendra Barua, Sankar Baruah and Kedarnath Goswami visited Digboi and strongly condemned such brutal action of the British employers.¹⁹ All over Assam, the district and the local committees of A. P. C. C. organised large protest meetings in their own locality. Even AITUC and BPTUC, too, strongly condemned the anti-labour action of the British administrators. Suresh

Chandra Banerjee, President of AITUC, in a statement demanded Assam Ministry to conduct an enquiry into the incident. Similar statement was made by Mrinal Kanti Bose, President of B. P. T. U. C. Besides, at the Sraddhyananda Park in Calcutta on 21 April 1939, B. P. T. U. C. had organised a large mass meeting where the masses not only condemned the police firing but also greeted the fighting workers and the people of Assam against the imperialism.²⁰

Anti-War Students Movement

The second inspiring incident took place on 6 December, 1941. It was a simple students' protest movement centering around a boycott of an exhibition held at Gauhati, for the purpose of raising war-fund being organised by the then Assam Government; but was faced by such an immatured decision that it not only turned violent but also made it a mass-based peoples agitation.

It has been reported that inspite of the students' opposition, the Principal of Cotton College with the help of the Headmistress, Rajabala Das of Radhakanta Handique Girls' High School of Guwahati had organised a science exhibition to collect war fund. Even Mrs. Das, forcibly collected contributions from her students which resulted strong resentment among the students. On 4 December, Mrs. Das, with a girls' procession, proceeded to enter Cotton College gate. Following a hot discussion between Mrs. Das and the anti-exhibition students group, she was requested not to visit the exhibition. On the next day, the husband of Mrs. Rajabala Das, with Humphry, the deputy commissioner went to the college and assaulted the students. The incident provoked unrest in the college campus. Hundreds of students came out to demonstrate in the office of the Principal. On the next day, i.e. on 6 December, 1941, a huge students procession was brought out in protest against the assault.

The procession of more than two thousand students, starting from the Cotton College campus proceeded towards Palton bazar Anglo-Bengli High School. Taking the students out of Bengali High School, the procession entered the Kuli (labour) depot road near Bengali High School. The road was narrowly spacious and had a high wall on its left hand while a pit full of water was lying on the right hand. As soon as they entered into the narrow road, the deputy commissioner

Humphry, along with his armed men, surrounded the area. The student processionists were bewildered as there was no other way either to retreat or to move ahead. Yet the procession marched forward. All on a sudden Mr. Humphry ordered dispersing, claiming the rally as 'unlawful assembly'. The armed men let loose unrestrained lathi and bayonet charge resulting severe injury to more than hundred students including one girl. Forty students were arrested on the spot, among whom Uma Sarmah and Haridas Deka were politically radical.

The wounded students were admitted to the Cotton College hospital and also to the State Hospital where about fifteen cases were reported serious. Medical report said that most of the cases were of head injury which indicates the severity of the oppression.²¹

Strong public resentment spread immediately on the same day at about 4 p.m. Students of Gauhati based educational institutions assembled spontaneously in the church-field near Cotton College and held a mass-meeting, in which two resolutions condemning police and government's assault and also demanding civil enquiry of the incident were taken. An unprecedented total hartal was observed throughout Gauhati on 7 December, 1941. In the evening at 5 p.m., in the Union field, a huge public protest meeting of about 10,000 people was held, which Nilamani Phukan presided over. Four resolutions were passed unanimously including condemnation of the government's action.

As soon as the news of the incident spread outside Gauhati, all sections of the masses came out in protest spontaneously. In some places, situation became tense. At Tezpur, large number of people gathered at the church field following a huge protest rally, organised by the District Students' Union. On 6 December, students observed general hartal. Strikes and hartals started like a bonfire. A spontaneous fire of mass-rally and protest spread one after another at North Gauhati, Goalpara, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Barnagar, Tinsukia, Chatia, Bihpuria, Chaigaon, Abhayapuri, Sibsagar, Nowgong, and even in Sylhet and Calcutta. At Jorhat, strong public resentment found expression in the public protest meetings; On 8 December by the students and on the 9th, by the lawyers. On the 11th there was a successful general strike. In Mongaldai of Darrang district, since 7 December, students

of all schools started strikes. At Tihy, on 8th December, with Ratnakanta Choudhury in the chair, a public meeting was organised where *United World Students, Challenge government's assault on Students* etc. slogans were voiced from the dias and responded by the attending masses. In short, it can be said that protest meetings and hartals were the common feature of the day since 7 December, 1941.²²

At Calcutta, AISF had organised a public protest meeting in the Ashotosh Building, where condemning the 'inhuman' police firing, a 'council of action' was formed. On 11th December, BPSF observed the *Gauhati-Divash* in Bengal. In all the educational institutions, students joined hands with the students of Assam, observing successful general students strikes. Members of the Young Assamese Club of Haridinge Hostel Union of Calcutta and the ASL Club of Calcutta too had organised protest meetings.²³ Even the incident of police firing led to a constitutional crisis when Rohini Kumar Choudhury, the education minister, resigned from his ministry without showing any reason. A 'no-confidence' motion against the ministry was moved by the opposition legislators under support of Rohini Kumar Choudhury but was moved back.²⁴ Being recovered from the constitutional crisis, the Government came out to suppress the revolutionary firment. With a view to justify police firing the government had published a manifesto and circulated it widely. The publication of the manifesto, once again, aroused strong public resentment resulting in acceleration of militancy of the students movement. Within a short period of its beginnings, the stirred movement merged with the anti fascist, anti-war movement, which had already been started throughout the country.²⁵ Radical militancy had also been infused in the movement as because, the movement was guided by the radical student leaders of Asom Chatra Sanmilan, specifically to name, Gouri Sankar Bhattacharjee, its President, who was a student cadre of AISF. In most of the areas, the protest meetings were organised by the local units of AISF.²⁶ At Jorhat, *Sadou Asom Gauhati Divash* was observed by the local committee of AISF, as decided in the State Committee. A big public meeting was held at *Kachari Maidan*, where Comrade Jaganath Thakur was in the Chair. Several speakers including Bhadrakanta Goswami, Bishnuram Borah, Kirtinath Bordoloi, Prafulla Chandra Baruah, Kumud Chandra Khound spoke and demanded withdrawl of

DEA (articles 36 and 147). The above mentioned day was observed almost all over Assam.¹⁷

The spontaneity of the movement lasted only for two months. Since February, 1942, the stirred movement was gradually losing its momentum basically for two reasons :

- 1) The assurance of the guardians that they would move for the fulfilment of their demands.¹⁸
- 2) The emergence of ideological differences among the rank and file of the AISF members on the Patna resolution weakened the united spirit of the student leaders.¹⁹

Though the movement was practically arrested, public grievances were once again provoked strongly by the government announcement of a deficit budget of about 11,32,000 rupees for 1941-42, including introduction of new taxation for 1942-43. The Saadulla budget was absolutely an anti-people one. It, on the one hand, increased the rate of the reduced revenue as passed by the Bordoloi Ministry ; on the other hand, reduced the expenditure in all category of welfare measures including education.²⁰ Besides, public reaction against the Saadulla Ministry had been intensified on the introduction of Census and Development scheme, under which, the government had tried to open new forest reserves to rehabilitate immigrant peasants, particularly in Nowgong and Mongaldai sub-divisions.²¹

To sum up, it can evidently be assessed that besides revolutionary atmosphere that prevailed throughout the country, the hard hit socio-economic conditions of Assam in general, and the relevant districts in particular, provided a favourable background to the revolutionary masses of Assam. In spite of their sincere involvement and dedication, the failure of the 'peoples' Raj' was due to its lack of co-ordination among the various administrative wings, its faith on the strength of spontaneity instead of revolutionary ideology and overall, its lack of experience and correct leadership.

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