

# ANTI-BRITISH RISING AND PEASANT REVOLTS IN ASSAM

## KEY POINTS

- Anti-British uprising in Assam
- Revolt of 1857 in India and its impact in Assam.
- Rebellion of Maniram Dewan.
- Causes of the failure of his rebellion.
- Impact of the Revenue administration of the British in Assam.
- *Raijmel* and peasant revolts in various places.
- Tribal Revolts.

### 3.0 : Anti-British uprising in Assam

By the thirties and forties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the East India Company established itself as a powerful ruler in India. In Assam also, they created a strong administrative base and successfully thwarted all possible uprisings of the local people against the British. This was clear from the failed rebellion of Gomdhar Konwar and Piyoli Phukan. Through a completely new revenue system they took control of the economics. In this revenue system the foreign government attached more importance to collection of taxes. They took no measures to erase the sorrows and difficulties of the peasants and poverty ridden subjects. In Assam, in the administrative system prior to that of the British, revenue was not collected through cash. But the introduction of

payment of land revenue as well as other taxes by means of cash by the British further impoverished the Assamese subjects while the exploitation by the British increased day by day. The statistics given below show the increase in revenue in Assam just before the revolt of 1857 (in terms of rupees)

District	1832-33	1842-43	1852-53
Kamrup	1,10,181	2,52,991	2,95,996
Darrang	41,506	1,35,454	1,57,795
Nowgaon	31,509	1,10,318	1,28,873
Sibsagar	—	80,843	1,14,463
Lakhimpur	—	34,780	46,553
Total	1,83,196	6,14,382	7,43,680

The new land revenue policy and the money economy of the British government created deep resentment among the Assamese common people. This money economy led to the creation of the *Mahajans*, who thrived on interests in Assam and the Assamese subject populace was compelled to take out loans on interest from this very class to clear their land revenue to the government. This class of *Mahajans* were the immigrant Marwari (kayar) and Bengali businessmen.

At that time the villages in Assam were self sufficient and there was hardly any scope of earning money by selling the local produce. Moreover the limited availability of markets also added to the penury of the common people.



Anandaram Dhekial Phukan

The fact that the land revenue struck at the backbone of the Assamese people, was also written by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in his application to Moffat Mills in 1853. He pointed out that the land revenue fixed by the British was much more than what could be afforded by the peasants.

On the other hand, the British government did not take any measures for the development of agriculture. As such, whenever the climate was unfavorable agriculture suffered and the common people of Assam had to face famines continuously. In his application to Moffat Mills Anandaram Dhekial Phukan mentioned that in 1851 in some areas of Kamrup and Darrang, the condition was such that apart from the family valuables, parents were compelled to sell their own children for a handful of grains. At the

same time in Upper Assam cholera and measles took an epidemic form. Such epidemics led to the annihilation of several villages in Assam in 1839, 1847 and 1852.

In the early part of the 19th century the British had established tea gardens in Upper Assam. To encourage the tea gardeners land revenue of the lands falling within the gardens was exempted. As a result the burden of making up for this loss of revenue fell upon the poor peasants.

Apart from the money economy introduced as a part of the British revenue policy, certain other factors also contributed to the pathetic condition of the Assamese subject populace. For example, like in the other states of India, in Assam too, the British administration was responsible for the deterioration of the cottage industry. From the time of the Ahom dynasty the *Paat* and *Muga* silk of Assam had a special demand in the Indian market but the patronage of the British administration to import foreign cloth material had a very negative impact on the people associated with this industry.

The condition of the aristocratic class *vis-à-vis* the common people was in no way any better. Some people of the Ahom feudal class had tried to associate themselves with the British administration from the very beginning but due to their lack of modern education the majority could not become a part of the new administration. On the other hand, the British rulers had to import educated Bengali persons from Bengal. As a result, the officials of the Ahom dynasty began to lose their posts and positions very fast while the newly appointed Bengali *Babu's* gradually began to assert their importance in the administrative set up of Assam.

Though some of the Assamese aristocrats who held posts like Phukan, Barua, Rajkhowa etc during the Ahom reign were made *Manjadars* with the responsibility to collect taxes, largely this responsibility was vested upon the outsiders like Bengalis from Srikhatta in Bengal or Marwaris from western India. This act of the British not only deprived the Assamese aristocratic class, but is also alleged to have created a riot like situation under the domination of the outsiders.

The Assamese aristocrats during the Ahom rule had led a luxurious life with servants galore to cater for their whims and fancies. But, the British stopped slavery in Assam in 1843 and as a result this class suffered from the dearth of labourers to work in their estates and fields. Naturally, this class which lost its privileged social position and power was dissatisfied with the new administration. They felt humiliated on being

compelled to perform manual labour in their own fields and other works like their erstwhile slaves.

At the same time it cannot be concluded that the abolition of slavery by the British led to the uplift of the slaves and labourers of the Ahom rule. It was to engage this group of people as labourers in the newly established tea gardens of the British that they had been freed from the control of the Assamese aristocrats. No immediate measures were adopted for the benefit of these people. Consequently, this class of people cannot be said to have been satisfied with the British rule.

According to eminent Historian H.K. Borpujari, several Brahmin *Parohits* of Upper Assam joined in the revolt of 1857 against the British rule because the government took away the excess of the *Lakheraj* and untaxed lands which they had been occupying and enjoying since ages and also fixed revenue on the remaining lands. It was natural that this class of people went against the British rule.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the East India Company's rule that had already completed three decades prior to the revolt of 1857 could not satisfy any section of the common people. The rebellions of GONDHAR KONWAR, PIYOLI PHUKAN or GADADHAR in the initial years of the British rule were expressions of dissatisfaction of the Ahom aristocratic class against the foreign rule. These rebellions were confined to that class and the common people had no participation in them. But in the years following the repression of these rebellions, the accumulated dissatisfaction against the British rule percolated down to the common people. The Assamese common people were now beginning to rise against the domination and exploitation of the British rule.

### 3.1 : Revolt of 1857 in India and its impact on Assam

1857 is a year that needs special mention in the history of Modern India. It was in this year that the Indian soldiers recruited into the British army declared mutiny and shook the foundations of the British rule in India. The imperialist policies of the British like the Subsidiary Alliance of Lord Wellesley, Doctrine of Lapse of Lord Dalhousie etc led to the incorporation of many Indian Kingdoms into the British Empire. The deprived rulers of these kingdoms and their supporters gave full support to the mutiny of the Indian soldiers which broke out on 10 May 1857 in protest of their various miseries and strengthened the revolt. Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II, Nana Saheb of Kanpur, Maratha leader Tantia Toppe, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi etc. led this revolt. The



Rani Lakshmi Bai  
of Jhansi

revolutionaries wanted to place Bahadur Shah Zafar II as the Mughal Emperor once again and end the British rule in India forever.

It has already been discussed that the Assamese common people were rising against the domination and exploitation of the British. The revolt of 1857 gave a golden opportunity to the elite class of Assam to throw off the yoke of British rule and reestablish the Ahom monarchy. That is why the revolt of 1857 led to reactions in Assam. Some people of the Brahmaputra valley tried to instigate the Indian soldiers in the British army based in Assam to fan the fires of the revolt here and with their help chase away the British and install a Prince from the Ahom royal family as the King of Assam. In the Barak valley also some soldiers from Chittagong revolted against the British.

When the revolt broke out in North India, there were two British army regiments posted in Assam- The First Assam Light Infantry in Dibrugarh and The Second Assam Light Infantry in Gauhati. Though at first the sepoy of both these regiments were indifferent, the news of the sepoy mutiny in Bihar resulted in some amount of dissatisfaction spreading among the Dibrugarh-Gauhati regiments and also in the sepoy barracks of Sibsagar and Saikhowa.

### **Revolt of Moniram Dewan :**

The people who tried to instigate the sepoys against the British government were members of the erstwhile elite class of Assam who were dreaming of throwing out the British from Assam and reinstating the Ahom monarchy with the grandson of former Ahom King Purandar Singha, Kandarpeswar Singha, as the King. The person who planned this was Maniram Barbhandar Barua who was more popular as Maniram Dewan. When the Indian soldiers declared mutiny in Meerut, Maniram Dewan was in Calcutta. He had gone there to file an application to the British government requesting that a portion of Upper Assam be placed under the rule of a scion of the Ahom royal family.

In Calcutta Maniram Dewan met Madhu Mallik, a Bengali *Mukhtiyar* and together they hatched a conspiracy to drive the British out of Assam. Bahadur Gaonburha, Phormud Ali, Piyoli Barua, Dutiram Barua, Mayaram Nazir etc were some elites of Assam who responded to Maniram Dewan's appeal. It was decided that Ahom Prince Kandarpeswar Singha would lead the soldiers in Assam in revolt and Maniram Dewan would bring arms and weapons from Calcutta to help them.

The British government got a scent of this conspiracy in the middle of August 1857. Accordingly preparations were made to apprehend the rebels. Understanding the seriousness of the matter Chief Commissioner Jenkins requested the government to send a force of trained European soldiers.

In the first part of September 1857 the Principal Assistant Captain Holroyd intercepted many letters written by Maniram Dewan wherein the conspiracy against the British government was clearly mentioned. On the request of Holroyd Captain Louthar arrived at Jorhat with a force and arrested Kandarpeswar Singha on September 7. He was sent off to Calcutta and kept in Alipur jail.

Immediately after this Maniram Dewan was arrested in Calcutta. He was the main leader of the conspiracy against the British. He was kept in the Alipur jail for about two and a half months and then sent to Jorhat in December.

Captain Holroyd set up a special Court of Justice wherein Maniram Dewan and Piyoli Barua were sentenced to be hanged to death on being found guilty of charges of conspiring against the British government. And on 26 February 1858 both of them were hanged. Madhu Mallik, Kamala Barua, Dutiram Barua, Mayaram Nazir etc were sentenced to be imprisoned for life. Bahadur Gaonburha and Sheikh Formud Ali were sent away to the Andamands and all their properties were confiscated.

Those soldiers who took part in this revolt were also punished. For example, some soldiers of Dibrugarh regiment were imprisoned for life while some soldiers of Golaghat were dismissed from service.

The Ahom prince Kandarpeswar Singha was a minor and as such he was kept in the special jail in Bardhaman till 1860. Later on he was allowed to come back to Gauhati where he set up residence. He was not permitted by the British government to go back to Jorhat. He was given a pension of 500 rupees with effect from 1853.

After the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, Dutiram Barua, Sheikh Formud Ali, Bahadur Gaonburha etc were allowed to come back to Assam from the Andamands.

In this manner the attempt of Maniram Dewan in 1857 to overthrow the British in Assam and re-establish the Ahom Monarchy ended in failure.

## Maniram Dewan's personality and life story

Maniram Borbhandar Barua came to be known as Maniram Dewan. He had not only been a witness to the Burmese invasion of Assam and how the Assamese people had suffered but also to how the British came to lord over Assam in 1826. Initially he was not opposed to the British rule. In fact in 1828 he had been appointed as *Shirastadar* (Revenue Book keeper) by the British in Jorhat. While working in this position he brought in many reforms in the Revenue department and proved his capacity. When King Purandar Singha was re-established in Upper Assam, Maniram Barua joined his service as the *Dewan*. But for reasons unknown, he resigned from this post



and joined in the Assam Tea Company, which was owned by the British and established in 1839. In 1844 he resigned from there as well and set up his own tea garden in Jorhat. The fact that he could not gain any exemption from revenue payment like the British tea growers agitated him. Moreover, Captain Holroyd who joined as the Chief Officer of Sibsagar district in 1851, deprived Maniram's family of the revenue that they had been enjoying since generations. Although the career of Maniram Dewan as an authoritative officer began under the British government but it was also under the same government that he was reduced to a common man devoid of post, position, wealth and prestige.

Maniram Dewan realized one thing that his fortunes would not change for the better under the British domination. For that to happen the Ahom Monarchy had to be restored. Like the Ahom Prince Kameswar Singha, Maniram Dewan too, refused to accept the pension of 1000 rupees from the British. When Kameswar Singha expired in 1851, Maniram Dewan fully supported the idea of establishing his son, Kandarpeswar Singha on the royal throne.

In 1853, when the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, Moffat Mills came to Assam to investigate the administrative situation, Maniram Dewan presented two applications before him. In one of these, he gave an account of his services rendered to the British company and requested the government for some suitable remuneration. In the other, he requested that Ahom Prince Kandarpeswar Singha be reinstated on the Ahom royal throne and also the details of the sufferings and miseries of the aristocratic class. In this application

though he mentioned about some positive effects of the British rule in Assam like-the end of severe punishment like body mutilation during the Ahom rule, he also pointed out some negative effects like-awarding pension to undeserving people, reducing the elite high officials to the standard of the common people by depriving them of all their privileges.

Though on the basis of his applications, Mills critically examined all aspects of the English government, he did not sympathize with Maniram's applications. In fact, he declared Maniram to be a conspirator.

The report of Mills dashed all hopes of Maniram Dewan and he completely turned against the British. As he understood his own limitations, he decided to avoid a direct confrontation with the British government and in early part of 1857 went to Calcutta to appeal to the British government to restore Kandarpeswar Singha on the throne of Assam. But He never got an opportunity to meet the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal.

At that time he came to know about the revolt of the Indian soldiers in the British army in Northern India and began to dream of overthrowing the British rule in Assam with the help of the Indian soldiers in the British army posted in Assam through a revolt. He sent some secret letters from Calcutta to Kandarpeswar Singha in Jorhat and some other trusted people. In these letters he advised that the Indian soldiers in Dibrugarh and Golaghat be contacted and a revolt raised. Maniram Dewan planned to come to Upper Assam with arms and ammunitions during the time of Durga puja and join in the revolt. Unfortunately, many of these conspiratory letters fell into the hands of the officer of Sibsagar district, Captain Holroyd and Maniram Dewan was immediately arrested in Calcutta. His supporters in Jorhat and Sibsagar like Piyoli Barua, Kandarpeswar Singha and others were arrested. Maniram Dewan and Piyoli Barua were kept in Jorhat Jail and hanged on 26 February 1858.

### 3.1.01 : Causes of the failure of the revolt of 1857

From the above discussion it can be surmised that in spite of political and organizational efforts Maniram Dewan and his associates could not ignite the fire of the revolt in Assam like in Northern India.

➤ (First of all the number of rebels in Assam was very small. Maniram Dewan's supporters were confined to Jorhat and Sibsagar. He hardly gained any support in Nowgaon, Kamrup and Gauhati.

Second, the leaders of the rebellion failed to understand the importance of time and so, even after completion of all preparations



for the revolt, they failed to begin in time. As a result the British government gained a lot of valuable time for defence.

Third, The chief organizer of the revolt, Maniram Dewan was far away from the scene of revolt. At that time Calcutta was very far away from Assam and to command a revolt from there, through letters, was quite impractical. Maniram Dewan should have arrived in Assam at the earliest. No doubt he had been an able administrator but he lacked the expertise to be the leader of a revolt. Maniram Dewan can be said to have been the best example of what happens when the leader of a revolt underestimates the strength of the opposition or fails to appreciate their ability and intelligence.

Fourth, Maniram Dewan and his associates never tried to involve all sections of the society in the revolt. The new Assamese middle class people of Nowgaon and Gauhati were not at all sympathetic towards the revolt. At that time the newly emerging Assamese middle class intelligentsia was more attracted towards the Bengali middle class lifestyle. They had no wish to go back under the administration of the Ahom monarchy again. As such, this group of people of Assam neither supported nor showed any sympathy towards the revolt of 1857. Consequently, though there was some babbling in the name of the revolt but there was no explosion as such.

Fifth, the rebels of Assam failed to maintain the secrecy of their activities. As a result the British government came to know about their entire conspiracy and could successfully suppress the revolt.

Sixth, the rebels in Assam had no access to arms and ammunitions as was required. Though Maniram Dewan was supposed to bring arms and weapons, he was arrested before he could do so.

Last, the Indian soldiers of the British army posted in Assam did not form the backbone of the revolt in Assam. The rebels in Assam could not gain the support of these soldiers as in Meerut, Delhi and Lucknow.

All the reasons mentioned above led to the fact that the revolt of 1857 had no serious impact in Assam. Whatever little impact was there was completely eradicated by the British government.

### **3.1.02 : Importance of the Revolt of 1857 in Assam**

Though the revolt of 1857 was crushed by the British with an iron hand, this was for the first time in the history of Assam that Assam was associated with a historical Indian event.

Second, the peasant revolts that began in 1861 in Assam got

inspiration from the revolt of 1857.

Third, in Assam too, the Hindu and Muslim communities were united to take part in the revolt and thus fuelled the growth of Nationalism.

During the Indian National Movement the freedom fighters of Assam were inspired by the activities of Maniram Dewan and his associates in the revolt of 1857.

### 3.2 : Rise of Peasant's Revolt in Assam

After the suppression of the Revolt of 1857 all powers of the East India Company were transferred to the Queen of England through the Queen's Proclamation of 1858. The Revolt had led to a pitiable economic condition of the British government. Since a huge amount had to be spent in the name of suppressing the Revolt, the deficit budget of 1857-58 rose to 14 million pounds. And so in the years following the Revolt the British government was most concerned about how to stabilize their economic condition and make up the deficit. As a result the burden of taxes fell on the Indian masses. In Assam also the same policy was adopted and this led to several additional taxes over and above those already there. Between 1854 and 1870 there was a hundred percent rise in taxes. Stamp Duties in 1858, Income Tax, License Tax (for using forest products like wood, bamboo etc) and Grazing Tax (for grazing cattle in the fields and meadows) in 1860 were introduced. In Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong excise duties were imposed. Rivers in which gold was found and fishing was done were now auctioned. All these measures of the British government to collect more and more revenue badly affected the common people and peasants. It has already been mentioned that though taxes were collected from the peasants, no steps were taken by the government for the development of agriculture and the agriculturists. The foreign government did not exempt the peasants from payment of taxes even during natural disasters, epidemics or famines. As a result of all this, the common people of Assam were totally disgusted with the British government and this led to a series of peasant revolts in Assam from the middle of the 19th century.

#### 3.2.01 : Raij Mel

The peasant revolts in Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were led by the *Raij Mels* ( People's Assembly). These were in no way any kind of political organizations and yet their importance in Assam was immense. These *Raij Mels* did their best to make the peasants and other common people politically conscious. These assemblies grew under the supervision of the leading personalities of the society like

*Anti-British Rising and Peasant Revolts in Assam*

the *Goanbarha*, *Doloi* and *Gosain* etc and worked under their directions. These assemblies were not limited to a single village like a *panchayat*; they comprised of several villages. Everyone, irrespective of caste, creed, community or religion could participate in these assemblies. This in itself gave a unique character to the *Raj Mel*s. There is a proverb in Assamese- "*Rajei Raja, Gyatyei Ganga*", which exalts the power and positions of the public and community. The *Raj Mel*s reflected this proverb in the real sense. It was in these public assemblies that people learnt how to take unanimous public decisions and also, how to democratically demand the government that their decisions are implemented.

The *Raj Mel*s were an intimate part of the Assamese rural life particularly in solving various problems right from the days of the Ahom Monarchy down to the British rule. It was the *Raj Mel*s that awakened the peasants in various places of Nowgaon, Kamrup and Darrang against the British policy of exploitation which led to the British local administration being paralysed.

### 3.2.02 : Phulaguri Dhawa (1861)

The banner of revolt that was raised for the first time in Assam by the exploited peasants against the British policy of economic exploitation was the *Phulaguri Dhawa*. Located near Nowgaon, Phulaguri was a village inhabited by the *Tiwa* ethnic community who survived on the commercial cultivation of Poppy. When the British government began to sell opium (which was extracted from the Poppy seeds) these peasants were naturally infuriated. In 1861, the British government completely banned the cultivation of Poppy. This agitated the *Tiwa* ethnic community and more so, because the selling of opium by the British government continued. The British administration's decision adversely impacted upon the economic condition of this community. Another news that made rounds was that the government would impose tax on *Tamul-paan* (Ateca nut and betel leaves) also.

As soon as the news of banning Poppy cultivation spread, on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1861, more than 1500 peasants from the various adjoining areas gathered in Phulaguri and organized a *Raj Mel* to oppose this decision of the government. In the *Mel* it was decided to submit a petition to the Deputy Commissioner requesting the removal of the ban on Poppy cultivation and not to fix any tax on *Tamul-paan*.

At that time the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgaon was Herbert

Seonce. Instead of showing any sympathy towards the public, he misbehaved with them. To protest against this, the public held *Ruff Mels* for five consecutive days from 15<sup>th</sup> October in Phulaguri. The 1000 strong peasants who gathered on the first day were mostly armed with bamboo sticks. In the following days the number of gathered public increased and on 18<sup>th</sup> October about 4000 people had gathered. Deputy Commissioner Seonce sent his Assistant Commissioner Lieutenant Singer to the meeting. When Singer inquired about the objectives of the meeting, one Jati Kalita explained on behalf of the public that since the local authorities had not shown any sympathy towards the demands of the peasants, namely to remove the ban on Poppy cultivation and not to fix taxes on *Tamul pean*, they were now planning to approach the highest authorities. Singer became very excited at this and ordered the people to leave. Moreover, he also ordered his sepoy to snatch away the bamboo sticks carried by the peasants. While this tussle over the bamboo sticks broke out, one peasant struck Singer on the head with his stick and felled him to the ground. When the other peasants also joined in this attack, Singer died on the spot. His body was thrown into the Kollong river. The police force that had accompanied Singer fled the scene. This incident has been mentioned in the pages of history as the *Phulaguri Dhawa*.

After this incident many peasants were arrested by the authorities on the charge of the murder of Singer. Thousands were kept imprisoned in temporary jails in Raha and Phulaguri. As a result of the trial Lakshmi Deka, Soughor Lalung and Ronghor Deka were awarded death sentence. Some of the accused peasants were sent away to *Kalpyapant* (Andaman and Nicobar Islands).

### **The Importance of Phulaguri Dhawa In History :**

Though the British authorities tried to dismiss the *Phulaguri dhawa* as an ordinary revolt of the opium addicted peasants against the government's banning of Poppy cultivation in Assam, in reality this revolt had far reaching consequences.

First, the voluntary participation of the *Lalung (Tewa)* ethnic community and the *Kaibartta (fishing)* community in this revolt gave it a mass character. The peasants were successful in getting the support of other classes of people- the educated elite Assamese middle class, exploited by the increase in land revenue, businessmen and some *Manjadaris*- though indirectly, extended their support to the rebels. The then Commissioner of Assam, Major Henry Hopkinson admitted

that if 50 soldiers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Light Infantry in Jorapur and 30 soldiers from Gauhati had not been brought to suppress the revolt, it would have kept on spreading. Then it would have been very difficult to control it. Altogether it can be said that this revolt had been successful because after this the government never imposed any taxes on *Tamil-poon*.

Second, the *Phulaguri* revolt was an example of the common people's attempt to free themselves from the clutches of the British imperialism. The aristocratic class of the Ahom Monarchy (who lost their power and privileges under the British and had already taken part in the revolt of 1837-58) also joined in this revolt.

The *Phulaguri* revolt attracted the attention of every section of the society and the decision of the public of *Phulaguri* not to pay any revenue can be termed as the beginning of the non-cooperation movement. Later on, this same mechanism was adopted by Mahatma Gandhi during the Freedom struggle.

Third, the *Phulaguri* peasant revolt was an inspiration for the peasants of other parts of Assam to think about their miseries in an organized manner. As a result, a few years later the peasants of various areas of Darrang and Kamrup district raised the banner of a series of revolt against the oppression and deprivation by the British government.

### 3.3 : Peasant Revolt of Lower Assam

Even after the *Phulaguri* peasant revolt the British government did not take any measures to wipe away the miseries of the peasants nor did they learn any lesson from this incident. In 1868-69 land revenue had increased between 25 to 50%. When in 1892, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir William Ward, increased the land revenue by 100% and arranged strict measures for its collection, the peasants lost control over their patience. The consequent series of peasant revolts that began in Assam in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, December 1893 to be precise, came to be known as the Assam Riots. The peasants of Rangia and Lasima in Kamrup district, and Patharughat in Darrang district decided not to pay taxes (no tax campaign) to the British government. The peasants who organized themselves through the *Raj Mel's* even went on to declare that those peasants who opposed this decision would be socially ostracized. It may be mentioned here that this revolt was not only against the British rule but also against the Marwari (keya) *Mahajans* who exploited the peasants by mortgaging their lands against financial loans.

### 3.3.01 : The Peasant Revolt of Rangia

On 24<sup>th</sup> December 1893 the peasant revolt began with the looting and vandalizing of the Rangia bazaar. On 30<sup>th</sup> December hundreds of peasants from and around Rangia humiliated the *Tehsildaar* of Rangia and Tamulpur, Radhanath Barua and destroyed shops, houses etc of Rangia *Haat*. They also looted the land mortgage papers of the peasants from the interest-mongering Marwari *Mahajans*. The peasants felt that the presence of the Marwaris had led to the increase in land revenue. The government had to send an armed force to control the situation but the Police Superintendent Riley could not muster the courage to arrest any of the peasant leaders because the protestors were very well organized. On 8<sup>th</sup> January 1894, the Police arrested 15 peasants from a *Raj Mel* which had been called to discuss how they would place their problems and miseries before the Deputy Commissioner. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January about 3000 peasants from various *manja* gathered in front of the Rangia Police Station. When the Deputy Commissioner McCabe ordered them to leave, they refused to budge. By evening, the peasants began to move closer to the Police Station hoping that the Deputy Commissioner might give some notice regarding reduction of land revenue. They also began to demand the release of their associates who had been arrested. When the Deputy Commissioner asked for a peasant representative to discuss the issues, the peasants shouted in a chorus that they would not pay the revenue at the increased rate. The peasants then, tried to forcefully enter the Police Station and McCabe ordered the Police to open fire. This compelled the peasants to retreat. On 10<sup>th</sup> January McCabe ordered through a notification that henceforth no public meetings will be allowed to be held without the permission of the Deputy Commissioner. The Deputy Commissioner then selected some leaders from the peasants and appointed them as Police constables. These people were then used not only to establish peace among the peasants but also to convince them to pay revenue to the government. These measures of the Deputy Commissioner must be said to have been successful because out of the 90,000/ Rupees that the peasants of Rangia had to pay to the government, 60,000/ Rupees was paid as the first instalment. Even then, the repressive policy of the British could not stop the peasants from holding public meetings. Peasants in Nalbari, Barama, Bajali etc continued to be as active as earlier and did their best to set up all hurdles for the government in revenue collection.

### 3.3.02 : Peasant Revolt of Lachima

The severe repression of the peasant revolt of Rangia by the British government could not stop it from spreading to other regions. The *Raij Mels* in Barama were very strong and here they created a force armed with stout sticks. In addition, for better communication they appointed postmen who not only carried messages but also acted as spies. In the Bajali region, comprising Lachima, Choukhuti, Panagaon, Sarthebari, Patacharkuchi etc, thousands of peasants participated in the *Raij Mels*. The largest *Raij Mel* in this entire region was held in Panagaon *sapori*. In this assembly peasants from various places like Rangia, Nalbari, Dharmapur, Bajali etc of North Kamrup took part. On 21<sup>st</sup> January 1894, when Dasuram Choudhury, the *Maujadar* of Kapla village near Lachima in Sarukhetri *Mouja*, and his *Mondal* Holiram Mishra went out to collect revenue, they were very badly beaten up by the people. After some days the *Maujadar* died. Arriving at the scene, the Circle Officer of Barpeta, Madhub Chandra Bordoloi arrested 75 persons and took them to his rest camp in Lachima. When, about 3000 people surrounded the rest camp and threatened to burn it down, he was compelled to release the arrested persons. The next day, Deputy Commissioner McCabe arrived there with about 30 policemen and soldiers from the Garha regiment. He arrested 59 rebel peasants and locked them up in a temporary jail. On 25<sup>th</sup>, around 6000 people signed a document demanding the release of the imprisoned persons and submitted it in the Deputy Commissioner's camp. McCabe showed no sympathy; instead by applying force, he chased away the crowd. Among those arrested were many leaders like Gosain Doley. These people were tied to the yokes like bullocks and paraded before the public as a lesson, so that no one might revolt in the future. 16 people were given various kinds of punishments for committing the crime of organizing the peasant revolt in Lachima and assaulting Holiram Mishra *Mondal*. Later, on the orders of the Calcutta High Court, the punishment sentenced for these people was reduced. Two years of rigorous imprisonment was awarded to Pushparam Kalita, Debi Dutta Sarma, Jayanti Bez, Nirbhasa Kalita and Monglu Kalita for organizing and leading the revolt.

### 3.3.03 : Peasant Revolt of Patharughat

The peasant revolt of North Kamrup had hardly cooled down when another peasant revolt began in Patharughat in the Mangaldoi circle of Darrang district. Right from the middle of January 1894, the public

had organized *Raj Mels* to oppose the increased revenue as well as its collection. The peasants of Kalaigaon, Mangaldi, Sipajhar of Mangoldoi circle and Patharughat *tehsil* gathered in these *Raj Mels*. After holding such public assemblies in their own areas, the peasants were planning a huge public assembly for three days, 26-28 January, in Patharughat. This news travelled from the *Tehsildars* of that area to the Circle Officer who in turn informed the Deputy Commissioner, J. D Anderson, about this proposed *Raj Mel*. In order to stop this huge public assembly, J. D Anderson, along with a force comprising of police and military personnel and the Police Superintendent J. R Berington, arrived in Patharughat on 27<sup>th</sup> January.

With the help of the police and military, the properties of those peasants who had refused to pay revenue, were confiscated. This infuriated the peasants and about 200 of them surrounded Berington who had gone for the revenue extraction. He somehow managed to save himself from the clutches of the public and reaching the Rest Camp, described everything to the Deputy Commissioner. A few hours later around 2000 peasants marched towards the Rest Camp. Almost each one of them was armed with sticks.

When the peasants reached the Rest Camp, Anderson advised them to go home as soon as possible but they did not move. At this the Deputy Commissioner ordered the Police Superintendent to disperse the peasants by using force, if necessary. Following this order when the Police Superintendent tried to forcefully chase away the peasants, they retaliated by brandishing their sticks, hurling stones-pebbles and moved in closer. The raining of stones and pebbles was such that the police-military and administrative officers, none could keep their eyes open. Under such conditions the Deputy Commissioner ordered the Police Superintendent to open fire. According to unofficial records, 140 peasants were killed and 150 peasants were injured as a result of the firing. On the other hand the official records showed 15 killed and 37 injured.

The peasant revolt of Patharughat was crushed by the British imperialist government with an iron hand. On account of participating in this revolt, according to official sources, 37 peasants were arrested and tried. The Circle Officer of Mangaldoi, Mr. Ransom settled these cases. Aklu Sheikh and six others were punished and the rest were all released.

The peasant revolts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Assam were no doubt successfully subjugated by the British government, but the series of



revolts that began from 1861, were a great source of inspiration for the Assamese common people later, when the freedom struggle started.

### 3.4 : Ethnic(Tribal) Revolt

From the beginning of the British rule in Assam, one by one, revolts had been taking place. Like the peasant revolts in the valleys, parallel revolts had been going on among the ethnic tribes of the hills also against the colonial rule of the British.

#### 3.4.01 : Jaintia Revolt

The Jaintia Kingdom went into the hands of the British from the Jaintia King, Rajendra Singha in 1835. The freedom loving Jaintia people were infuriated by this act of incorporating the Jaintia Hills within the Company's domain. More than the loss of land, it was the high-handed attitude of the British that agitated the Jaintias or Syntengs. Under the British Political Agent, the *Divani* and *Faujdar* responsibilities were vested in the *Dalols* but the foreign administration always tried to find their faults. The British made arrangements to extract revenue by banning community fishing and collection of firewood which was common among these people. Moreover, interference in the religious and traditional social practices and banning the use of weapons that had been used for generations, turned this ethnic hill tribe completely against the British. They organized village meetings with the *Dalols* and *Sardars* and began to prepare for revolt. On the other hand the British to establish their authority, began to impose taxes like House tax, Income Tax etc on these people who had never ever paid any tax in cash.

When the British implemented House tax the Jaintia's raised the banner of revolt by removing the *tehsildar* of Jowai. As soon as the news spread, revolts were declared in Jayantipur, Mulagul, Jiflong, and Sera areas also. The British administration adopted stern measures. In retaliation the Jaintia's under the leadership of Ukiang Nonbah doubled the strength of the revolt. They met in a meeting near Jowai, where they swore to overthrow the British authority from the Jaintia Hills and re-establish their own rights. On 17<sup>th</sup> January 1862, the Jaintia's made a sudden attack on the British Camp in Jowai. The rebels had already blocked the two roads connecting Jowai-Cherrapunji and Cherrapunji-Jayantipur. The 44<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry and 33<sup>rd</sup> Bengal Military Police forces deployed by the British administration had been torturing the people inhumanly. The rebels too, killed many of their opponents. In the midst of this violent conflict between the two sides,

the British administration entrusted the military and civil authority of the entire Jaintia Hills with the Brigadier General of the Eastern Command, G. D Showers. In addition B. W Morton was appointed as the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The continuous attacks from the government side was leading to the gradual erosion of the strength of the rebels. The British government promised a general amnesty if the rebels surrendered voluntarily and an award of 1000/ rupees was announced for anyone who would capture and hand over to the British their leader, Ukiang Nongbah, alive. At last Ukiang Nongbah was captured by the British and in the presence of a huge crowd, he was hanged to death in Jowai. This incident dampened the spirit of the rebels to a large extent and many of them surrendered voluntarily. In this manner by 1863 the Jaintia Revolt came to an end.

### **3.4.02 : North Cachar Revolt**

Among the revolts raised by the ethnic hill tribes during the British rule towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the revolt in North Cachar hills under the leadership of Sambudhan Kachari must be mentioned. The center of this revolt was Maibang. This revolt went on for one year between 1881-82. In 1880, the British government formed a Kuki force of 100 Kuki men to counter an attack on North Cachar by the Angami Nagas. In addition, an English Officer was also appointed to control the ethnic people of this area. These were the reasons that led to this revolt under the leadership of Sambudhan Kachari.

In this revolt, the rebels destroyed the houses built by the British by burning them down. In Gunjung they killed the orderlies of two British Officers and a Police Officer. After this, the rebels suddenly attacked the government forces in Maibang. In the violent conflict between the two sides, many of the rebels lost their lives. Major Boyd, a British Officer, who was seriously injured, later died. There is no information as to what happened to the leader of this revolt, Sambudhan Kachari.

### **3.4.03 : Revolt of the Nagas**

The British political control was not acceptable to the Nagas also. As a result, in the British dominated Naga territories, winds of dissatisfaction began to blow from the very beginning. The Nagas proved their love of independence when, in 1878 they killed a British Officer Damante and his security. Kohima was blocked by the rebels for several days. This revolt of the Angami Nagas was crushed with an iron hand by Colonel Johnston.

### 3.5 : Revolt in Manipur

The kingdom of Manipur was outside the administration of Assam. Since many years Manipur was recognized as a native Kingdom under the protection of the British. In 1890, an internal quarrel broke out in the Manipuri royal family for the Throne. In this struggle among the successors, the Chief Commissioner of Assam interfered unnecessarily. Taking advantage of the presence of the British, the Crown Prince Kulachandra, dethroned the king, Surachandra and sat on the throne himself on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1890. Though the King Surachandra appealed for help to the British, the latter recognized Kulachandra as the king of Manipur. Thereafter the British began to put pressure on Kulachandra to banish his Commander-in-Chief (*Senapati*) Tikendrajit, who was the main leader of the anti-British revolt which was secretly going on, from the kingdom. But to banish the popular leader who was working to protect the freedom of the Kingdom, on the direction of the British, was not an easy task for Kulachandra. When the Chief Commissioner of Assam, J. W. Quinton and four other European officers came to Manipur themselves to capture Tikendrajit, the freedom seeking Manipuris killed all of them. To avenge this incident a strong military contingent was sent to Manipur. Tikendrajit was successfully captured by the British force and on the charges of anti-British activities and killing British Officials, he was hanged. King Kulachandra was exiled and a minor Manipuri prince, Churaachandra was declared to be the King in September 1891. The Political Agent of the British government was given all responsibilities of the administration of Manipur since the King was a minor. Manipur had to pay Rs. 2.50 Lakh to the British government as compensation for the losses incurred during the revolt. In addition, a sum of Rs. 50,000 had to be paid annually by Manipur to the British. In this way, the British established their domination in the Kingdom of Manipur.

#### SUMMARY

- In Assam, right from 1826, when the English rule was established, various political revolts were organized to end the foreign domination. After the revolt of Gomedhar Konwar and Gadadhar in 1828-30, Assam also felt the impact of the pan-Indian revolt in 1857. Under the leadership of Maniram Dewan and taking advantage of the revolt of 1857, the attempt to overthrow the British rule in Assam and seat an Ahom prince on the throne had failed. Maniram Dewan and Piyoli Barua were hanged.

- ☛ Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century several series of peasant revolts took place in Assam. The first among these was the revolt of Phulaguri in 1861. In this revolt a government officer by the name of Lieutenant Singer was killed by the rebels. The British administration suppressed this revolt with a strong hand.
- ☛ Even after Phulaguri, in 1893-94, the peasants revolted against the increased revenue by the British. These series of revolts took place in Patharughat in Darrang; Rangia, Lachima, Sarthebari etc in Kamrup and various places of lower Assam.
- ☛ The ethnic hill tribes also sought freedom from the British rule and raised the banner of revolt in North Cachar, Nagaland and Manipur etc. This revolt of the ethnic Hill tribes was also crushed by the British.

## EXERCISE

Very short answer type questions :

1. After the establishment of the British rule in Assam how did the system of revenue collection change?
2. In which year did Moffat Mills come to Assam?
3. Who were the Keyas ?
4. Who led the revolt of 1857 in Assam?
5. Which Ahom Prince did the rebels of Assam want to re-install on the throne in the revolt of 1857?
6. Who was the Bengali *Mukhtiyar* who helped Maniram Dewan?
7. Who was hanged along with Maniram Dewan?
8. Who tried the case of Maniram Dewan?
9. Mention two causes of the failure of the revolt of 1857 in Assam.
10. In which years were the Stamp tax and Income tax implemented?
11. Write two causes of the pitiabile condition of the peasants of Assam during the British rule.
12. Who was Lieutenant Singer?
13. When did the *Phulaguri Dhwaja* take place?
14. When did the peasant revolt of Rangia take place?
15. Where is Lachima located?
16. When did the peasant revolt of Lachima take place?
17. When did the peasant revolt of Patharughat take place?

*Anti-British Rising and Peasant Revolts in Assam*

18. Who led the Jaintia revolt in 1861?
19. Who led the revolt of the ethnic tribes of North Cachar in 1881?
20. Who punished Tikendrajit with the death sentence?
21. In which year was J.W Quinton murdered?

**Long answer type questions :**

1. Discuss in brief the causes of the revolt of 1857-58.
2. Discuss the role of Maniram Dewan in the revolt of 1857-58 in Assam.
3. Discuss the reasons why the revolt of 1857-58 failed in Assam.
4. Discuss the importance of the revolt of 1857 in Assam.
5. Write a note on the *Phulaguri Dhawa*.
6. Discuss the peasant revolt of North Kamrup in 1894.
7. Give an account of the peasant revolt of Patharughat in 1894.
8. Write a note on the Jaintia revolt against the British in 1830.
9. Write about the anti-British revolt of 1891 in Manipur under the leadership of Tikendrajit?

**Write Short Notes :**

1. The Revenue system implemented by the British in Assam.
2. Maniram Dewan.
3. *Phulaguri Dhawa*.
4. Peasant revolt of Lachima.
5. Battle of Patharughat .
6. Importance of peasant revolts in Assam.
7. Tikendrajit.