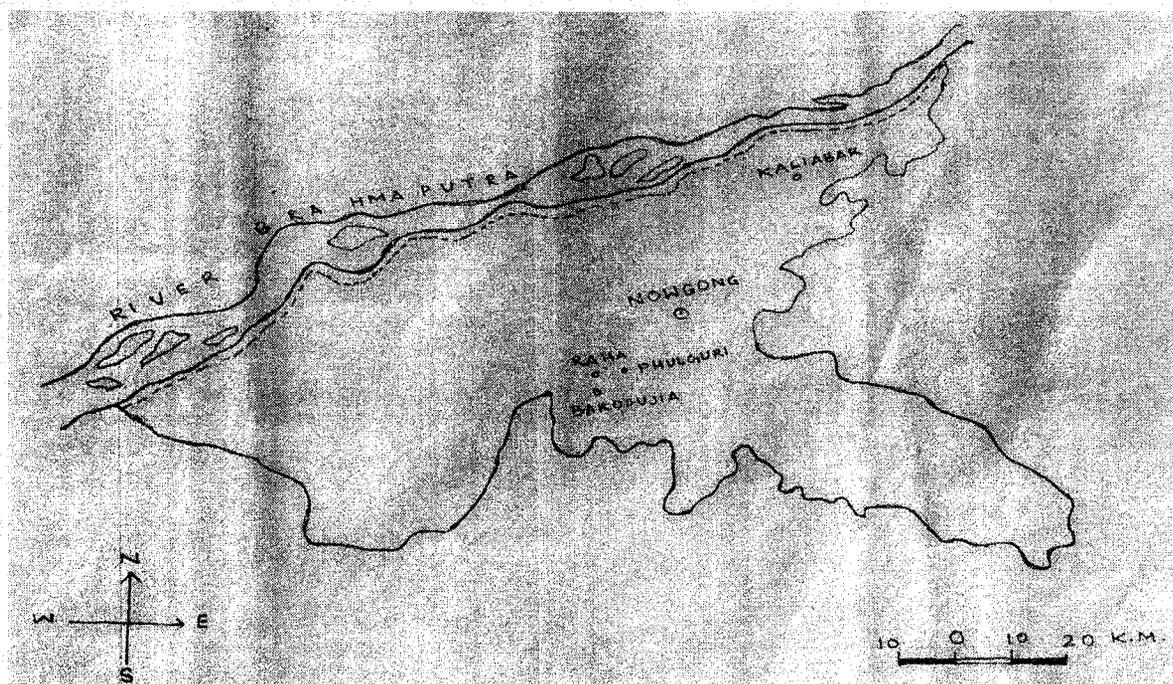


CHAPTER – SIX

PEASANT UPRISINGS OF 1861

Southern Central Assam or Nowgong extends from Jagi *Chowkey* on the Kalang River on the west to the river Dhansiri on the east is bounded on the north by the Brahmaputra and on the south by Cachar and Jayantia. The Kalang is but a small river, an arm of the Brahmaputra that branches off nearly opposite Biswanath and making a sweep towards the south and west, joins the great river again about 12 miles above Guwahati.¹



According to J.N. Bhuyan, on the eastern direction of the erstwhile Nowgong was Morikalang Lake. On the west and the south was the river Kalang. *Sahib* graveyard was on the north. In the words of Gunabhiram, Nowgong was a beautiful town just like *Indrapuri*.²

Historically famous Phulaguri was within the erstwhile Nowgong in Colonial period which is still now within Nowgong. There is a beautiful history regarding the nomenclature of this historical place.

After subjugating Jayantia king Bijoy Manik, the Coch general Chilarai halted and took rest at Raha camp. There, he was given warm welcome by the people of Phulaguri. The place was in abundance with wild and colourful '*Phul*' (flowers) of various species. Chilarai, being overwhelmed and enchanted at the natural beauty of the place, asked the congregation to keep the name of the place after the name '*Phul*' (flowers) as '*Phulaguri*'³ (Land of flowers).

According to some, some tribal people after having cleared the wild flowers and jungles established there a *haat* (market) on the bank of the river Kalang which was known as Phulagurihaat (Phulaguri market).

The importance of Nowgong is enhanced by the fact that there was good water communication between Nowgong and Guwahati. Due to the navigable convenience all throughout the year and more production of various crops, Nowgong became a place of commercial importance in Colonial period.⁴

The place was very famous for its agricultural productions. *Ahu*, *Sali* and *Bao* rice were extensively cultivated in Nowgong. In 1870-71, rice cultivation covered 78, 373 acres but by 1875-76 it increased by another 38,876 acres. This figure is much lower than 1, 31,728 acres shown in the return for the year 1849-50. The formation of the Naga Hills into a separate district and the transfer of some areas to the adjoining district of Sibsagar resulted in the decrease. Indian corn was cultivated but not extensively. The *Karbis* were the main growers of the crop. Besides rice and Indian corn, various kinds of bean, *mati kalai*, *mug*, *khesari*, *musuri* (various pulses) were also grown. Though the cultivation of jute was well-known, it was not a favourite crop among the peasantry. Rhea or China grass was cultivated by certain sections of people who made use of its fibre for fishing-nets.⁵

II

The great upheaval of 1857 had laid severe financial strain on the Indian Colonial government immediately after the suppression of the upheaval. For undertaking this job of restructuring the Indian finances to meet the requirements of the British Imperial interest, James Wilson, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury of England had made some financial arrangements which contributed immensely towards the aggravation of

the economic position of the peasantry in the country and this led to the growth of restlessness amongst them in the post-upheaval period (1857) in the 19th century. The local authorities in Assam also directed their attention to tapping new sources of revenue with a view to meeting their increasing expenditure. The land tax or revenue and its regular augmentation had become a great source of resentment and irritation among the Indian peasantry and it was more so in the Brahmaputra valley.⁶

The grievances of the peasantry found manifestation in Nowgong in 1861 and 1868-69 and in Kamrup and Darrang in 1893-94 respectively.

Peasants coming from different parts of Nowgong assembled at a *Namghar* (temple) near Phulaguri on the 17th September, 1861 and about 1500 peasants on that same day marched to the *Sadar* Court in order to get scrapped the anti-ryot policy of the government. They demonstrated peacefully before the Magistrate and placed a petition before him. They made a formal protest against the ban on poppy cultivation and the proposed taxes on their houses, gardens and *paan*. The petition prayed that no further taxes be levied on their *paan* orchards and betel-nuts. The District Magistrate, instead of taking the matter seriously, took it casually and going ahead, he even humiliated them. He dealt with them in provocative and high-handed manner. Some had been fined and some others had been detained in the police station by him. The belligerent peasants, therefore, congregated under the shade of three big *Ahat* trees on the bank of the river Kalang seeking for retaliation against the government.⁷

In that congregation of October, 1861, they finally resolved not to pay the taxes and devised ways and means to bring their grievances to the notice of the authorities. The meeting was scheduled to be held for five days at a stretch with a view to enabling participation in the deliberations from distant and the remotest villages.

Peasants of Raha, Jagi, Kahighar mouza, Barpujia, Chapari, Kampur, Jamunamukh, etc. attended the meeting. It seems that the leaders of the meeting included Sunday and Wednesday within their five days' deliberations expecting huge gatherings as that 'two days were the marketing days for the people of Raha and Phulaguri.'⁸

Nearly, 1,000 peasants congregated by 15th October, half of whom were armed with *lathies* (sticks). A force was deployed to disperse the meeting but was ended in

smoke. By 17th October coming, peasants nearly 3,000 to 4,000 had gathered coming from the remotest villages.

According to the *Datialia Buranji*, *Panchaoraja* (five kings viz – Sararaja, Kahigharia, Topakuchia, Baropujia and Mikir raja) and *Satoraja* (Seven kings – their areas of jurisdiction were Tetelia, Mayang, Baghara, Ghagua, Sukhnagog, Tarani, Kolbari and Damal) also joined in the revolt against the government.⁹ as they had also their grievances. Seeing such huge gatherings, police made yet another attempt to disperse and dismantle the meetings and arrested, therefore, some leaders on the same day. But fortunately, peasants rescued their leaders forcibly and the police, finally, had to leave the spot. The following day, an English Officer, Lieutenant Singer, came with a force and had interacted with the leading members. Their leader Jati Kalita reiterated their complaints about the ban on poppy cultivation and apprehension about the tax on the *paan* orchards and income. They also reiterated that they were contemplating devices of placing their complaints to the Apex authorities since the District Magistrate had expressed his reluctance to hear their grievances. After parleys, Singer ordered the congregated peasants to lay down their arms and disperse.

Though some dispersed but many declined to be dispersed. A scuffle ensued where Singer himself attempted to seize the *lathies* (sticks) in their possession and got himself accidentally killed. Golap Singh, the *daroga* of Raha Police Station, was set adrift to Kalang river.¹⁰ The police force, seeing the entire deteriorating situation, finally fled in panic.

The news of Singer's death and an intended attack on the town reached Nowgong. Haladhar Barua, the then *daroga* of Nowgong,¹¹ remained alert to cope up with the situation. The District Magistrate dispatched a small armed force entrenching himself at the Treasury. The force fired on the crowd leading to the death of several. Though the tribal peasants used bows and arrows against the force but they could not defend themselves. The Sepoys of Light Infantry inflicted exactions on the armless peasants. Even women were not spared from their inhuman atrocities. The peasants of Raha and Phulaguri had been forced to supply materials for the Sepoys of Light Infantry.¹²

By 23rd October, normalcy returned at Phulaguri due to arrival of fresh force from Guwahati and Tezpur. Though normalcy returned but everywhere, there prevailed terrific

solitude and psycho-phobia. Even dead bodies of the rebel-peasants were burnt secretly by their kith and kins on the bank of a *beel* near Phulaguri. If the bodies of the deceased were identified by the government, they were scared that it would add to their problem.¹³

Many peasants lost their lives in the upheaval of Phulaguri. There were huge casualties but Colonial machinery kept all them concealed as hiding the fact and information was a light matter for the alien government.

Forty-one persons including the sons of *Lalung Raja* were arrested in connection with the killings of Lt. Singer. Bahu Kaivarta of Basigpur *mauza* (Hatigarh) who heaved on Singer's head, Rahu Kaivarta, Kati Lalung, Thamba Lalung, Jab Lalung, Katia Lalung, Mohikoch and Koli Deka all were charged in connection with Singer's assassination.¹⁴

Temporary jails were erected at Raha and Phulagri with bamboo piles and hundreds of peasants from Phulaguri and the neighbouring villages were kept confined in these jails without providing sheds against sun and rains for months together under tight security guards and without minimum food and clothing.¹⁵ Narsing Lalung and other peasants leaders, mostly of tribals, were punished with long term imprisonment and transportation.

Hero of Phulaguri revolt was Lakshan Singh Deka of Katahuri. Rongbor Deka hailed from Topakuchi village of Raha was the lieutenant of Lakshan Singh Deka. Changbor Lalung, Bahu Kaivarta, Banamali Kaibarta, Hebera Lalung – they were the heroes of Phulaguri revolt.¹⁶

Anyway, this heroic resistance by the Subaltern group against the augmenting tax burden and also the bureaucratic mindlessness is still very much fresh in the folk history as the '*Phulaguri Dhawa*'.

III

The blood flame and blood drops of Phulaguri revolt is a tragic history written on unwritten hearts of the people of Nowgong especially those from Phulaguri. Each and every revolution is born out of the womb of injustice and the revolt of Phulaguri is also not free from this. The peasants of Phulaguri of erstwhile Nowgong had fiercely resisted the Colonial dominion and the evils of foreign rule contributed to the culmination of the

natural anger which arose out of the experiences of life in the succeeding days. In Colonial exploitation system, those who suffered and harassed at best at the hands of the British were the peasants and the Subaltern class. That's why they were the first to react against the Colonial government.

The causes that developed and gave birth to the revolt of 1861 can be categorized into two headings, viz. (A) General and (B) Special causes.

General Causes:

It is said that humanitarianism underlaid many of the reforms introduced by the British in the 19th century.¹⁷ But in Assam, we find a completely opposite picture. The government apparatus by initiating an endless process of raising revenue demand created tremors and turbulence in the hearts of the peasants what they could hardly forget. They remembered their previous days as halcyon days since they had to pay less revenue during that Ahom regime.¹⁸

The peasants of Assam led an independent life in Pre-Colonial period. Their independent life received tremendous setback after the introduction of the British rule in their land. The alien government tried to employ them as laborers by imposing heavy tax what the native peasants did not like. The planter community urged the government in 1859 to enhance the land revenue rates so that poor peasants could be flushed out of their villages to work for wages on their tea gardens.¹⁹

According to Irfan Habib, nature's calamities underlined man's oppression. The heaviest burden that the peasants had to bear was the land tax, an arbitrary confiscation of such a large part of his produce. Payment of land tax was the root of all major social conflicts involving the peasants.²⁰

In 1861, the government resorted to heavy enhancement of land tax throughout the province, more particularly in the western districts – Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. People of Phulaguri of Nowgong resisted against this in 1861.²¹

According to Kalita, the root cause of the Phulaguri upheaval was economic.²² Throughout the 19th century, the government had been primarily guided by financial consideration and complete protection of the peasants from the oppression of the government had been a mere dream in Assam.²³

The Colonial government realized Rs.1, 55,651 in 1852-53 from land revenue and other taxes and that too only from Nowgong district.²⁴ Realization of such heavy amount that too only from one specific district leads us to think that probably the government resorted to harsh methods in realizing the revenue resulting in culmination of anger of the peasants of Nowgong.

Instead of criticizing the revenue hike, even the Christian missionaries also supported the revenue hike of the government. In the issue of November, 1861, it was mentioned in '*Orunodoi*' that the rate of revenue in Assam was so light and nominal that such rates could not even be imagined in other provinces of India.²⁵

A peasant is always in close contact with his land which survives him. According to Walter Fernandez, land is not merely a source of cultivation or of building, in an agrarian economy; it is a sign of a person's social status.²⁶

The British distorted their so-called social status by imposing heavy burden on land. Tribals in Assam especially of Nowgong were generally freedom-loving people. Their only occupation was agriculture and they depended on land. So, whenever the government imposed tax on land they took it as a challenge to their rights and social status.²⁷

The British government imposed heavy tax burden on the ordinary peasants. But members of the royal family of *Darrang Raja* when applied for remission, they were exempted from paying land revenue. The members of the royal family of the *Darrang Raja* failed to pay the revenue even at half rates (1853-54, 1854-55) as fixed earlier and sought remission from the government. Bolinarayan Konwar, Amritnarayan Bahadoor, Rajooram Konwar and Rajnarayan Konwar were among them. Even the government exempted land revenue and money pension to the direct descendants of the Ahom kings.²⁸

But such type of sympathy and tenderness was not at all shown to the mass people of Assam despite of their incapability and inability which gave birth to disdain against the Colonial authority.

The anomalies in the revenue system also created discontentment among the ryots against the British. The manner how settlement in temporarily settled areas was conducted was arbitrary and unjust. The classification of land was neither scientific nor

based on actual productivity of the soil.²⁹ The conduct of the Cadastral survey was defective. Monuments of the fields of each *mouza* were not carefully and systematically tested. Moreover, objections of the peasants were less discussed and less examined. Surveys were not free from errors.³⁰

Cheap price and high revenue also created problem for the people of Assam. The price of edible goods was cheap and available in Assam in 1876 and 1888. According to Gunabhiram Barua, the price of *Jaha*-rice was 4 or 5 paise per seer in erstwhile Nowgong. A family could take the curry of *mowa*-fish at his table by 2 paise. With one hundred rupee, a family could lead his month happily and even saved from that. The price of 10 seers of rice (good quality) was one rupee at Nowgong *Sadar* market in 1875. The price of 8 seers gram or 20 seers *matimah* (a kind of black pulse) or 7 seers salt were one rupee.³¹ After 12 years also (1887-88) at the same market, 8 seers good quality rice or 16 seers ordinary rice could be purchased at one rupee. Gram 9 seers or *matimah* 15 seers or salt 8 seers could be purchased at one rupee.³²

There was no dearth and want of food and clothes.³³ If the price of edible goods were cheap and available in 1876 and 1888, then it is quite natural that it was cheaper in 1860-61. For instance, there was probably no dearth of things at Nowgong in 1860-61. Prices of local commodities were cheap but on the contrary, the rate of revenues was too high. The relation between the price rate and the revenue rate were centrifugal and centripetal. The government gave them less price for their crops but collected more revenue from them. There was no conformity and uniformity between give and take which finally gave birth to a wave of resentment in their minds against the government.

A peasant takes a great deal of pride in his agriculture. It is the life blood of a peasant. Behind his crop lies his blood-drop. The Colonial government through the maximization of land revenue sucked the blood of the poor peasants. Gandhiji very rightly observed that if villages live who can perish India and if villages perish, who can save India.³⁴

The British, by discouraging agriculture, sought to destroy the village economy of Assam. They did not encourage traditional agriculture of Assam, rather tried to perish it by abolishing the *Paik* system so that they could be flushed out from agriculture to plantation. But the nobles and aristocratic class did not like its abolition and took it as an

insult to them. For instance, Brahmin slave holders of Kamrup even held a protest demonstration and submitted to the authorities a bunch of 1000 petitions seeking permission to retain their slaves and bondsmen.³⁵

In ancient and medieval period, our native government gave more importance in agriculture sector. For instance, for the development of agriculture, irrigation had been practised in India from ancient times onwards. Many works of the Mughal emperors on the Ganges and the Jamuna, the inundation canals of Sindh and the tanks, wells and field embankments found everywhere in India³⁶ show that in ancient times people of India attached great importance to irrigation. On the contrary, Colonial government showed more apathy in this irrigation sector. As scarcity of water was an impediment of agriculture, the British government should have given more importance in this irrigation sector.

For the improvement of agriculture, even Mohammad Bin Tughluq in medieval period opened an agricultural department called '*Diwan-i-kohi*'.³⁷ But the so-called modern men with modern outlook and modern technology hardly did such step what our medieval ancestor did in the 14th century. By establishing Agriculture Technology Development Centre, they could have ameliorated the condition of agriculture.

Cattle are the backbone of Indian agriculture. According to Mills, the cattle of Assam were inferior and suggested measures to improve the breed of cattle by importing bulls from the North Western Province (NWP).³⁸ But his suggestion hardly received due attention from the government. The area under cultivation, the nature of the crops grown and the extent of the livestock may be accepted as the best standards of agricultural prosperity. According to Gadgil, livestock is one of the standards of agricultural prosperity.³⁹

The government by defying these standards blocked the road of development of agriculture. Unfortunately, the apparatus and process of agriculture throughout the hills and plains, remain till date almost the same except that chemical fertilizers and power tillers have come to be used in a very limited way in some rice fields.⁴⁰

Moreover, to avail the services namely credit, marketing services, services relating to seeds, fertilizer, agricultural tools, there was lack of Co-Operative office. The Colonial government remained totally indifferent to it. They cared less for agricultural

development of Assam and on the contrary, spent days and nights for tapping new sources of revenues. According to P. Goswami, in spite of the systematic maximization of revenue, nothing was done to improve the condition of agriculture. Industrial growth and development had no links with the agricultural sector of Assam⁴¹ which finally invited resentment after resentment in the land.

Phulaguri is situated on the bank of the river Kalang. Kalang, Kapili, Haria – these rivers inundated Phulaguri during the flood season. In spite of her natural abundance like fishes and tortoises in the *beels* like Jakarua, Rangagada, Bagidowa, Pahupuri and Tap-takarai and deers, milk, rice etc., Phulaguri was not a secured land for agriculture.⁴² The rivers made the destiny of the Phulagurians - sometime pauper and sometime princes. Their progress had often been handicapped by flood and the cholera epidemic.⁴³

It is said that humanitarianism resulted in many administrative measures to fight flood, famine, control epidemics.⁴⁴ But that were on lips and words as the government showed absolute apathy in fighting the natural calamities. In 1822, there was a whole-scale destruction of harvests by locusts in the district of Nowgong resulting in scarcity of foods. A second blight was noticed in 1840 and next to that occurred in 1858. The ravage of locusts was aggravated by the appearance of insects as well.⁴⁵

Moreover, heavy cattle-mortality also deteriorated the economic and agricultural condition of the peasants of Assam but measures taken by the government was far from satisfactory. They rather invited natural calamities by heavy destruction of forest. As a result, primitive fury of the people burst out as the time rolled on.

By introducing Disaster Management System, Animal Health and Veterinary Centre, Flood Control Department, Meteorological Department, Agriculture Technology Information and Development Centre, the Colonial government could have evaded natural calamities to certain extent. More noticeable aspect to be mentioned here is that there was no Crops Insurance System to compensate and respite the peasants from the damage of crops caused by locusts, floods, droughts etc. Disease of men and cattles, calamities of flood and fire, lack of cheap credit facilities and wiles and artifice of money-lenders contributed to the impoverishment of the peasantry.⁴⁶

By abolishing slavery and *Paik* system in Assam, the British did a yeoman service to the people of Assam but they did it only because of their own interest – that is, to create labour class for tea plantation. Not only that, for the interest of their tea industries, they prepared certain waste land rules and by such rules rural cultivators had been displaced from their lands. Moreover, the Colonial government leased out to the planters such land which were actually not waste land. Land - green, rich and thick with natural resources - had also been occupied by the European planters in the name of waste land. In Nowgong, some forest land (*sal* trees areas) had been sold as waste-land.⁴⁷ The planters even usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the *jhum* rights of the tribal shifting cultivators.⁴⁸

At the initial stage of the British rule, people of Assam had good faith on the British and because of this; they showed their catholicity to the government. On mere request, King Purandar Singha even granted to the Assam Tea Company an extensive area near Gabharu hills in 1836 for cultivation of tea in anticipation that in near future, his subjects would be able to reap the benefits of this new enterprise.⁴⁹ But his anticipation proved wrong in later period which gave birth to resentment and disdain in the minds of the people of Assam.

It remains expressed that the planters formed the largest land-owning class in Assam but this class contributed less to the revenue of the state. While the common peasants paid between Rs.1-8 and Rs.3 per acre annually towards the land revenue, the planters held most of his land rent free.⁵⁰ Peasants of the province resented against this discrimination which finally burst-out as an outbreak in the following days.

Colonial government encouraged migration to remove shortage of labour in their plantation industries. Migratory people at the initial stage came in small numbers but later on in large proportion including their children and family which found expression in the growing population pressure on the land. The population of the Brahmaputra valley, according to an official source, was estimated at 8, 30,000 souls in 1826. It became 12, 00000 in 1853.⁵¹ This increase served the interest of the planters only, not at all of the native cultivators. As a result, indigenous cultivators had expressed their anguish against the authority.

Moreover, due to the rise of tea industries in Assam, flow of labourers began to increase which gave birth to food crisis in the province. As a result, demand for productivity of food-grain increased. To remove the food crisis, the government then relaxed the waste land rules to encourage cultivators from outside.⁵² But government's such drive and strive was not welcome by the native cultivators as it jeopardized their mainstay. In addition to the inter-state migration, there also occurred inter-district migration in Assam. For example, peasants from Kamrup and Darrang migrated to other adjacent districts and marked their hatred for the present condition and social order. Heavy burden of revenue and taxes and thick population density also compelled them to migrate. According to R. Saikia, their migration to another district was their silent protest and disdain against the *Raj*.⁵³

It is said that Banias and money lenders made the people of India poor.⁵⁴ The *Marwaris* during the Colonial regime took full advantage of trade and commercial opportunities⁵⁵ and thus they exploited people home and outside. Almost all the trades were solely in the hands of the *Marwari* traders but the profits they earned were not accumulated in Assam. Almost all profits had been sent and invested to enrich their homeland Rajputana which can be known from Jenkins' letter to Mills.⁵⁶ It reveals that they came to Assam not to serve the people of Assam. Had they come with that motto, they would not have sent the profits to their homeland and invested and spent all that for the development and prosperity of Assam province. The exploitation of the peasantry at the hands of the *Marwaris* and money lenders shattered the traditional peace and harmony of village life and created in its place, tension, anger and a smouldering feeling of revenge.

As said earlier, a society steeped in debt is necessarily a social volcano. The cultivators of Assam were born in debt, increased their debt and died in debt.⁵⁷ The cultivators of Assam took loans for various purposes, viz. social ceremonies, productive purposes and improvement of land, etc. Social ceremonies like marriage, *sraddha*, etc. accounted for 1/10 to 1/5 of the total loans and productive purposes like purchase of cattle, seeds, implements, etc. and improvements of land only 15 to 30 percent. Moreover, famines and crop failures were the general causes of loan.⁵⁸ The cultivators and the loanees of Assam had to mortgage their movable and immovable property such as

land or land documents, ornaments, utensils etc. in exchange of getting loans. Unfortunately, most of the peasant loanees failed to redeem the mortgage and finally lost their mortgaged property forever.⁵⁹ As a result smouldering discontent was bound to arise.

The cottage industry in India had, in the past, acted as a safety-valve for those dependent on agriculture because it gave a second source of income to the peasants.⁶⁰ British fiscal policy in Assam was directly linked with their commercial programmes in the rest of India. In order to achieve this broad objectives in view, the British, in stages, converted Assam into a vast Colony. Most of the indigenous institutions were either abolished or recast and certain new arrangements which suited them most were introduced. The abrupt change in policy was bound to create internal instability and social unrest.⁶¹

Throughout the British rule, India was mercilessly impoverished. Her famous manufactures were ruined and poor artisans and craftsmen were driven-out.⁶² The decline of cottage industry deprived the farmer of their subsidiary occupation, thereby considerably reducing their income and compelling them to take recourse to borrowing. Moreover, due to languishing of trade and handicrafts, unavailability of cash transactions, it was difficult for the peasants to go to the markets to seek relief. In addition to that, ruin of cottage industries not only created pressure on agriculture but also made many landless.⁶³ All this, created conditions for popular protest.

The Alien government introduced money economy mainly to meet the demand of revenue. The introduction of money economy without substantial increase in the existing currency inevitably fell crushingly on the peasants for whom there was no alternative but to leave their homes with discontent and anguish.⁶⁴ The growing monetization economy had induced many peasants to grow more poppy for cash, sometimes even at the cost of other crops which was not a healthy sign for the peasant society.

One important thing to be noticed is that after selling their cheap commodities in the markets, what remained in their hands, were not enough to pay the high revenue. Moreover, the peasantry was traditionally unaccustomed to this new money taxation system. In addition, they got less opportunity to sell their produce in cash whenever necessary. As a result, they could not pay their revenue in time which became arrears

causing hardship to them. Finding no alternative, they had to borrow money from the money lenders which only increased the burden of indebtedness. On the contrary, the transaction of the peasants with their money lenders after the harvest was no better than a distress sale. So, any proposal for augmentation of land revenue by the government made the peasant's blood boil in their veins.⁶⁵

Girded almost on all sides by mountain barrier, Assam remained practically isolated and geography had imposed a formidable barrier on her contact with the rest of the world. The people of this isolated land were happy and led a well-contented life as there was no lack of food in the alluvial soil of the Brahmaputra valley. But confrontation started with the arrival of the British into the land. The land abundant in food became the land of scarcity. They held for their pitiable condition the British as their interest received tremendous withstand at the hands of them.

It is said that British judicial system established the principle of equality and created consciousness of positive rights.⁶⁶ But their activities revealed their double standard. Slavery, for example, is an extreme form of inequality and because of this, government abolished *Paik* system in Assam. Outwardly, though their motive was good but their inner motive was disdainful - attract the *Paiks* to their tea gardens and make them their workers. Behind the abolition of *Paik* was their plantation interest, not establishment of equality in the land at all.

Moreover, another example of their bad activities was forcible collection of goods. The servants of the government forcibly took away the goods and commodities of the *ryots* for a fourth part of their value and by ways of violence and oppressions, they obliged the *ryots*, etc. to give five rupees for goods which were worth but one rupee.⁶⁷

Thus, the government exploited and exacted the *ryots* but they got no justice from the Courts as that were run by their own men. Discrimination and biasedness in judging the cases were probably the general phenomenon of the day. The Europeans, the rich and the well-to-do people received justice in the courts. Poor people got no justice from the Courts and they had to lose their properties in the name of case due to the excessive demands of fees by the advocates. The *ryots* of Phulaguri were aware of the injustice done to them by the British. Therefore, they became more conscious of their rights.⁶⁸

Slow progress of education might have led to discontentment of the people of colonial Assam. The people of the land could not compete or could not apply for the government's posts due to the lack of their educational qualification. Therefore, all the government's posts were filled up by the educated immigrants. The illiterate immigrants, on the one hand, put pressure on the agricultural lands and the literate section, on the other hand, put pressure on the government's offices. So, they held government responsible for this. The middle class section, indeed, became more victimized due to such picture of education.

Illiteracy of the mass people was due to the lack of adequate number of educational institutions in the villages. The number of such institution even in the towns of Assam province was also not satisfactory. Few villagers, therefore, could take opportunity of this. Most of them, on the contrary, remained as illiterate and they fell, finally, easy prey at the hands of the village *Mahajans* and *Marwaris*.

Jayantias' success against the Colonial British inspired the peasants of Phulaguri to revolt against the same authority. Nowgong, being the adjacent and neighbouring territory of the Jayantias, was the next to revolt against the injustice of the British.⁶⁹ It has been thus rightly remarked by A. Guha that 'encouraged and influenced by the Jayantia revolt, the peasants of Nowgong also started agitation against the authority.'⁷⁰

The Ahom kings did not interfere into the internal affairs of the tribal kings and thus maintained cordial relations with their neighbours. They, instead of dissatisfying the tribal kings, made them their part of administration. For example, the Kachari and Jayantia kings were the sentinels of the Ahoms. Making the kings as part of their administration, the Ahoms proved their political wisdom. On the contrary, the Colonial government eschewed this policy of the Ahoms and intervened into the internal matters of the tribal kings. They had been deprived of their posts and privileges. Ultimately, this gave birth to disdain and resentment in them against the government.⁷¹

Everything procured from forest and *beels* by an Assamese peasant in Pre-Colonial period was free of cost. But all these were brought under assessment during the Colonial period. For example, timber, thatch and reeds for the construction of his dwelling houses, *beels* for fishing and fodder for this domestic animals⁷² – all brought

under assessment. People reacted against this type of assessment as it created another financial burden on them.

While the people were uttering against the hike of revenue in the Colonial period, the Christian missionaries were at the same time busy in converting the people of Assam into their own religion. During the time of *Durga Puja*, there was huge congregation in Nowgong and several other districts of Assam. Missionaries took full advantage of it distributing there some religious pamphlets. In the pamphlets, it was mentioned that Jesus Christ could save people from the oppression of the *Kala-jar*, earthquake, etc.⁷³

The Colonial government, instead of rendering medical facilities to the patients during the time of fever, was busy in collecting revenue from the peasants. Similarly, the role of the Christian missionaries was also not satisfactory. They encouraged local people's conversion to Christianity, on the one hand and asked them, on the other, to utter the name of Jesus Christ at the time of natural calamities. To them, only Jesus could lighten their miseries and calamities. But the people were not satisfied at this. They rather wanted more practical and concrete step from them.

Special Causes

Opium was the most important source of revenue of the province of Assam, next only to land. It was a gold mine for the government.⁷⁴ Therefore, to make the opium-eaters totally dependent on government opium; they were forced to purchase high-priced government opium instead of growing it themselves. The government maximized revenue on opium for two reasons – to strengthen their economy and to force the ordinary people to work in the tea gardens of Assam. Opium policy was one of the sources of Colonial exploitation in Assam during the British regime.⁷⁵

Britain was the centre of anti-opium agitation at the international level. But their anti-opium agitation manifested their double standard – '*Ram naam*' on the devils' lips. Probably, opium could have been stamped out completely if the government had pursued a more rigorous policy.⁷⁶

Finally, the British abolished poppy cultivation in 1860-61. Prohibitory order of poppy appeared to the illiterate villagers of Nowgong as an infringement upon their social habits and customs. Capt. Welsh, by introducing poppy cultivation in Assam, made

the independent tribal people of Assam dependent on poppy and brought their physical destruction in the 18th century⁷⁷ and economic destruction in the 19th century. Actually government's prohibitory order was motivated not by humanitarian but by revenue consideration which ignited people's mind against the authority.

Most of the people did not like opium prohibition. To them, opium cures dysentery and malaria, alleviates pain and gives longevity. Opium gives them livelihood. Moreover, there is no religious bar of taking opium. Rather, opium eaters used to believe that in *Satya* age, the poppy trees were in abundance in the *Parijat* garden of lord *Indra*. Lord *Indra* gave this priceless gift to the people of earth.⁷⁸

People of religious bent of mind probably took the ban as an attack on their religion also. Moreover, already hard hit by the increase of taxation on land, prohibitory order irritated them. They were scared that they would have to pay dearly for the *abkari* opium which would compel them to work in the tea gardens of Assam as workers. People finally understood that the government's social measures to emancipate the people from effimination, weak, indolent and degradation was just an eye-wash to hood-wink the tribal peasants of Phulaguri.

It was just an ill-attempt of the government to draw their attention from real to other. Finally, they opposed the ban tooth and nail and girded their loins against the government's decision and precipitated and exploited the Anglo-Phulagurian enmity in 1861.

The Dravidian system of chewing betel nut has been widely prevalent in Assam from time immemorial. Regarding the chewing of betel nut, there are references in the *Smriti Sastra* and the *Kalika Purana*. It has great importance in marriage and worship also. Even the convicts could evade and lessen their crime by offering betel nut to their lord. Moreover, betel nuts determined the social status of the Assamese Society.⁷⁹

The contemplation of imposition of taxes on the betel nut and the betel leaf was just like an insult and blow to the social status of the Assamese society. Although the decision to impose tax on *pan* was not taken, even step about it frightened the people. Even Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam, traced the origin of the outbreak of 1861 on *pan* and *betel nuts*.⁸⁰ Though their fear was more imaginary than real but

experiences had convinced them to be alert and conscious with regard to any rumour emanating from their political masters.⁸¹

Multiplication of taxes became the matter of serious concern to the agricultural *ryots* of Assam especially the *ryots* of Nowgong. The government's measures for the imposition of tax on the dry crop land, on which Linseed and Mustard were grown was enhanced as per Board of Revenue's estimate to the tune of Rs.11,222 in the district of Nowgong alone in 1861. The peasants of Nowgong openly murmured and all sorts of evil stories are in circulation in the villages, calculated to increase discontent.⁸²

The income tax, though it did not touch a single agriculturist in Assam and even those who were assessed, the incidence of taxation was extremely trivial. Still its introduction generated misgiving in the minds of the people who were already overburdened with taxes. It was not the amount which mattered the people but the principle of additional taxation that was objectionable for the people. Obviously, this measure shook the confidence of the people who became more and more apprehensive of the next move of the government.⁸³

About this time, the government of India was finalizing the scheme for the introduction of the license tax for collecting forest products. Though the tax was not originally proposed to be extended to Assam, the agricultural community throughout the province was terribly frightened.⁸⁴ That the imposition of income tax and license tax created resentment in the minds of the people of Assam especially the people of Nowgong of 1861 is even confessed by Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam. He traced the origin of the outbreak of 1861 on imposition of taxes on income and license tax on forest products.⁸⁵

Except few, most of the people did not get benefit from the policy of David Scott.⁸⁶ If it is true, then we can presume that the seed of dissatisfaction was germinated even in the early part of the Colonial rule. Moreover, due to the corrupt practices and intrigues of the *amlahs*, irregular and undefined additional assessment, peasants became sick of it.⁸⁷ The atrocities of the *Choudhuries* and *Tahsildars* also were responsible for the outbreak of 1861. The announcements of the *Tahsildar* that the property of the defaulter *ryots* would be seized also created scare and anguish in the minds of the

peasants against the government. Tenants suffered lot under the exactions of landowners, *Mauzadars* and *Choudhaires* who were fully guarded by the state machinery.⁸⁸

The situation of Nowgong would have been evaded had the district authorities had been really sympathetic towards the difficulties of the common people.

The Phulaguri episode was the culmination of a large number of deep-rooted grievances accentuated by certain acts of omission and commission on the part of Herbert Sconce, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong. Had he been a little more tactful and cordial in his approach and instead of fining and detaining the people so often for making noise in the Court, endeavoured to calm their fears by explaining away all their misunderstandings, in all probability the meetings at Phulaguri would never have taken place; the people would have regarded the District Officer as a friend, instead of a foe.⁸⁹ By his act of imprudence both on the 17th September and the 9th October, Herbert Sconce contributed greatly to transform the excitement of the peasants into a devastating fire to consume the British rule in the Brahmaputra valley.

Herbert Sconce's order to the *Daroga* of the Nowgong *Sadar Thana* on the 14th October to disperse and arrest the leaders of the *Raijmels* and leaders' refusal to disperse and rather continuation of the *mels* abusing and attacking the Police Party on the 15th October conflagrated the situation.⁹⁰ Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant General of Bengal, also pointed his fingers to Herbert Sconce and held him responsible for the volatile situation of 1861. That Herbert Sconce, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong was responsible for the outbreak of 1861, is proved from the sufferings of his punishment. Sconce was demoted to the rank and pay of an Asstt. Commissioner and was transferred to the district of Kamrup.⁹¹

IV

The uprising of the peasants challenged the defensive capability of the British administration in the Brahmaputra valley.⁹² Seeing this, the government tried to bring division among the peasantry so that their united efforts could be checked. Ultimately, they became success in their design resulting in split among the peasantry. Their struggle, though did not last for long, basic weakness of it should not be studied in isolation of divisive policies applied by the dominant class and the class power to suppress.

The root causes that led to the failure of the outbreak of 1861 can be studied in this way –

(1) The peasants of Nowgong used traditional weapons like *daos*, spears, bows and arrows which could not be matched with superior fire power of the British.⁹³

Maniram Dewan saw the British might and compared the Indian might inferior to that of the British. The peasants wanted to drive out the powerful British armed with deadly weapons with their bamboo pop-guns.⁹⁴

The war materials and weapons of Phulaguri revolt were made in the factory of V.V. Kamar of Molankata nearby Raha but they proved meaningless. Though there were some old guns during the time of the Ahoms, they could not be used against the British as the latter had confiscated that.⁹⁵

Two sides confrontation - one numbering only a few led by whites assisted by native employees well armed represented the administration, the other in hundreds unarmed poor peasants led by village heads. Underestimation of the number and power of the British was the main reason that led to the defeat of the Phulagurians. The number of the former in Nowgong was less than the latter and latter thought it as their main strength and even dared to compare their bamboo-sticks equal to that of the British guns. Some even showed daring-do to flush-out all the British with a single bamboo-stick.⁹⁶

(2) According to Eric Hobsbaum, the peasantry though a potential revolutionary class, are basically a passive class and are in need of leadership.⁹⁷

Each and every Indian peasant movement produced a charismatic leader but the Assam movement none. Lakshan Sing Deka of Katahguri and Rongbor Deka and others – they could not be matched with the British. The Subaltern school of historiography is yet to fish out a hero. In the face of government repression, the leaders disappeared. As soon as the movement became leaderless, it fizzled out. The roar of the outburst metamorphosed into a quiet bubble.⁹⁸ Lack of unity and worth organizers among the leaders, absence of proper leadership and co-ordination among the tribes proved to be their undoing. Compared to the military skill, efficiency, decision making and adroitness, the local leaders were much more inferior to the alien leaders. Moreover, the peasants of Colonial Assam were not well-organized and well-disciplined and had also no planned or long-termed scheme at their hands.

Lack of common cause and different interest among the leaders also brought the downfall of the peasants of Nowgong. Moreover, most of the time it was found that revolt became volatile due to the inapt-handling of the leaders. Had the leaders become able to show the *ryots* right path keeping aside violent means and pursued conciliatory and moderate way, probably they could have harvested something from the government but they could not do so.

One important thing to be noticed is that most of the traditional leaders of the *Raijmels* were illiterate. Idea of compromise did not develop in their thinking and instead of prayer and petition, they resorted and preferred to violent and aggressive means.

(3) Economy has a great role to play in the revolt. The people of colonial Assam, at large, groaned under economic hardship. Probably, because of this, they could not fight a decisive battle against the administration.

(4) It can be inferred that sometime some section of the natives probably informed the administration regarding the ongoing preparation of the rebels and also about their whereabouts which brought their haste-fiasco. Regarding the decision of the *mels*, place of their sittings, the administration could know through their espionage system. For instance, while the people assembled at a *Namghar* of Phulaguri, the district administration got scent of it through their spies.

(5) Had the land and peoples' interest been greater than the coins, had there been high morality among the rebel leaders, probably, the alien rulers could not have defeated them so easily. Due to the betrayal and stretching out their secret hands to the Colonial power, Phulagurians had to witness a crushing defeat at the hands of the whites.

(6) Cruel policy, rumour and false propaganda from the side of the administration also brought the victory of the British. But the humble and innocent peasants they did not take asylum to false and mis-propaganda.

(7) The sharp British intelligence and instant and timely decision of the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police of the Nowgong were another cause of the hasty-defeat of the peasants of Nowgong. If sometime the number of troops sent to quell and disperse the *mels* was found inadequate, quickly additional troops was dispatched on the basis of the reports of the intelligence expediting the peasants' defeat. For instance, prompt communication of the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong to the

Deputy Commissioner of Darrang and timely arrival of Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam with reinforcement from Tezpur to Nowgong precipitated the defeat of the peasants. Emboldened by thus, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong visited Nellie, Phulaguri, Raha, Kachuhat and several other places and effected the arrest of 41 persons including the sons of the 'Old *Lalung Rajas*' alleged to have been implicated in the murder of Lt. Singer.⁹⁹

(8) The peasants of Nowgong could not combine to put up a united front against their common enemy; there were only sporadic out bursts, which the administration did not find problem to curb down. The revolt failed to embrace all sections of the society. Many declined to join the revolt and rather extended their support to the British. Some had even suspicions on the motives of the rebels. The revolt was highly localized and restricted to some area. Many areas remained undisturbed.

(9) Rich peasants of Nowgong¹⁰⁰ had their status in their societies. They spent their surplus in annual feast, ornaments, marriage ceremonies etc. Poor incurred debt and spent money on opium, marriages and purchase of bullocks. Sometime they even sold their labour as Coolies in the tea gardens. Due to economic disparities and enjoying high status, the rich maintained distance with the poor. Though rich and poor both fought unitedly against the British, how sincerely the rich did fight with the poor against the British that is under scanner and suspicion. Probably, their economic and social disparities invited their quick fall.

(10) The period of 1838 to 1893 may also be responsible for the defeat of Nowgong outbreak of 1861 as during this period, the powerful Ahoms became insignificant and neglected as the season of dead march started within the Ahom community.

(11) People of some well-to-do families of Assam probably had been given government jobs and this section acted whole heartedly for their master and brought degradation of their own people. Had all sections, irrespective of high and low, rich and poor, stretched out their helping hands to the peasants and fought honestly for them, probably, there was a little scope and hope of winning in the battle. Many did not join in the revolt despite having their sympathy due to losing their jobs. Being the ally of the British, some of the *maujadars* also stretched out their helping hand to the government. Moreover, though the

land owners joined in the agitation, they did not continue resistance due to fear of loss of properties under attachment order. Indeed, they were the first to retreat.¹⁰¹

(12) Ever readiness and ever preparedness also brought victory to the Colonial government. Wherever the sepoys went, they went with their fire arms. They were ever ready to face the situation. The rebels, on the contrary, whatever they did, they did that secretly. Moreover, wherever they went, they went unprepared sometime concealing their weapons in their clothes or in the jungles. As a result, the rebels could not use them instantly against the enemies.

(13) Sanskritisation may also be another cause that led to the defeat of the peasants. Some people who thought their status lower in social hierarchy tried to improve their status by rejecting their traditional style and mode of life. It is because of this, this section began to imitate the British and their culture. Instead of thinking of their own men and society, this section began to think and imitate the English culture.

(14) Illiteracy might be one of the causes of their failure. The British witnessed and experienced some great wars of the world and applied that experience against their enemies in the upheavals of the peasants.

(15) Lack of farsightedness and obstinate nature of the tribal peasants of Phulaguri was also another cause of their fiasco. Whatever decision the peasants took, they took that promptly and haughtily as against the cool, meticulous and contemplated decision of the administration which expedited their fall.

(16) According to Gunabhiram Barua, during the flood-season, there was good water communication system. '*Darrang*' and '*Santipur*', the two ships, introduced the people of Nowgong with the outside world mainly with the people of Gauhati.¹⁰² If it were true, we can then say that probably the British used both land and water route in the outbreak of 1861 and became able to give defeat to the rebels.

(17) Firm conviction and rigid determination also helped the British to win over the rebels of 1861. The remark of Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam, bears the testimony to it. The beginning of a tumult, he opined, is like the letting out of water; if not stopped at first, it becomes difficult to do so afterwards. His conviction helped him to curb the rising tide of 1861 but could not stop it permanently.

(18) Obsolete and traditional mode of peasants' protest was no match to the well-equipped Colonial system of the British. The peasants sometime probably resorted to artless modes of protest. Jealous gossiping, defamation, tales, nameless sabotage, rumours and nicknames and character assassination – these possibly constituted the symbolic resistance of the peasantry against the administration. Foot dragging, hypocrisy, false submission, desolation, petty thief, pretended ignorance, house-burning¹⁰³ - these were probably resorted by the peasants against the mighty British which proved futile and evaporated in front of the gun-fire of the latter. Their language of protest was not the same with that of the British. British language of protest was guns and brain. The people of Phulaguri, on the contrary, fought with passions and emotions. Bombastic words were their main weapons and power. In October issue of 1861 in *Orunodoi*, it has been referred how the leaders gave courage to the local mob. The leaders assured the mob not to scare of Colonial guns as they had *Barun-baan* (rain-arrows) to challenge that guns.¹⁰⁴ Emboldened by this, the mob jumped into fire like the moth and fizzled out.

(19) Reinforcement system also helped the British to win over the rebels. In the outbreak of 1861, the Assam Administration deemed it necessary to request the government of India for increasing the armed forces in the Assam province by the addition of 500 to 800 men and ultimately recommended the increase of the strength.¹⁰⁵ But such step and strive was rarely and hardly seen taken by the native rebels.

V

Traditional leaders mainly the tribals, viz. *Lalungs* (Tiwa) and *Kacharis* took vital role in the outbreak of 1861. Other non-tribals viz. *Kaivartas* and others also participated in the outbreak of 1861. But the Imperialist- and the Nationalist historians, instead of giving importance to study the role of the ordinary peasants and the workers, emphasized to study the history of the masses through the eyes of the elite leadership. But most of the leaders of 1861 were illiterate. It is to be noted that the illiterate tribal leaders could resist and fight against the mighty British though they failed finally.

The Indian elite took up the great task of modernizing their own society.¹⁰⁶ But in Assam, the number of elite was too few in 1860-61 and they were ambivalence towards their own society. The few and new elite who emerged on the scene had to face

opposition from the leaders of orthodox opinion. The latter had the power to fine and excommunicate temporarily or permanently. Excommunication was a serious matter as no member of the caste would have social intercourse including marriage with the excommunicated person and his family. Until the new elite increased substantially in numbers, they were subjected to harassment at the hands of the orthodox. Probably, because of this, few elite did not show their daring-do to take the leadership of 1861.

By nature, the revolt of 1861 was not a freedom movement. The revolt was organized with the object of compelling the government to yield to the will of the people by the withdrawal of unpopular measures of taxation.¹⁰⁷

Though there was variation among the peasantry of erstwhile Nowgong in the first half of the 19th century, they fought jointly against the Colonial British. Their discontentment was confined not only to them alone; non-peasantry class was also hard-pressed by the measures of the government. The posts and privileges of *Pancho-rajās* (five kings) and *sato-rajās* (seven kings) were abolished. 'Mauzas' of the *Mauzadars* were seized by the government.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, abolition of *Paik* system, plantation and wasteland policy, migration and industrial policy of the British did nothing good to the people of Assam. Almost all sections in the society were dissatisfied and took apparently the leading role against the government. Ultimately, the revolt assumed mass character. Compared to the other states of India, the notion and conception of casteism and racialism in Assamese society is more flexible.¹⁰⁹

Moreover, some other higher castes probably gave up their traditional value in order to have interaction with lower castes. Possibly, because of this, all sections irrespective of caste and creed, high and low, rich and poor stretched out their helping hands against the government to show mobility and solidarity for establishing their own rights.

The revolt of 1861 was localized and sporadic in character. Possibly, it is true that it was confined only at Phulaguri, Raha and other areas of Nowgong. Even the entire district was not totally influenced by it.¹¹⁰

The absence of intermediaries between the State and the peasantry and persisting clan unity among the peasantry were two major aspects of agrarian social structure that were responsible for the Peasants-State direct confrontation.¹¹¹

It is because of this that it was an open revolt against the government. The '*Amrit Bazar Patrika*' observed in its editorial that in the Deccan, the fury of the *ryots* was directed against the money lenders, in Bengal against the Indigo-Planters in 1860, in Pubna against the *Zamindars* in 1872 but in Assam, it is an open rebellion against the government.¹¹²

The nature of the peasant revolt in Goalpara is different to some extent from that in Colonial Assam. As against the peasant revolt of 1861, the revolt of the peasants in Goalpara was against the exploitation of *Zamindars*. The agrarian trouble of Ghurla *Parguna* of Gauripur *Raj* Estate was a revolt against the *Zamindar*. The outbreak of the rebellion in Habraghat and Khuntaghat was a clear indication in this context.¹¹³

Some termed the revolt of 1861 as a less important mere riot. Some again termed it as the revolt of the tribals alone (*Lalung-Kachari's* revolt) as no educated government Officials, *maujadars*, *laskars*, businessmen co-operated in this except *Lalung Raja*. *Orunodoi* ridiculed the Phulaguri revolt as the revolt of the *Kaniar Bidroh* (opium eaters'-revolt). Some of the Imperialist historians also termed it in same tune.¹¹⁴

The revolt was neither an 'opium eaters' revolt nor a 'tribal revolt'. It was the earliest popular movement of Assam.

Like the Phulaguri resistance of the Sub-altern groups, similar outbreaks were witnessed among tribals in different parts of British India. The *Kol* and *Bhumij* revolts of 1831-33, the *Santhal* insurrection of 1855-56, the *Birsa Munda* uprising of 1899-1900 had stirred the tribal regions outside Assam, M.N. Karna is right that the revolt of the *Lalungs* and the *Kacharis* in Assam against British Colonial administrators and their Indian troops, police and civilian sub-ordinates was in the same tradition of tribal insurrections.¹¹⁵

VI

An attempt may now be made to explore out the result and impact of the uprising of 1861. The movement of 1861 failed to achieve its aims and objectives to a great extent.

But it germinated the future seed of unrest which culminated after three decades viz. 1893-94. Phulaguri *dhewa* of Nowgong influenced the people of Darrang and Kamrup to take up the cudgels on behalf of the oppressed Peasantry.¹¹⁶ According to Barpujari, though the movement failed, the precedent was not lost upon the people: it was followed up soon-after.¹¹⁷ The revolt of 1861 inspired the people of other places to revolt against the British. The Nowgong outbreak was not the end but the precursor of agrarian unrest in Assam.¹¹⁸

Due to the increased rate of taxation and exaction of the Colonial apparatus, the Peasants had to abandon their cultivations. As a result, there emerged stagnation in agriculture. Moreover, involvement of the Peasants in the *Raij-Mels* and in the uprisings of 1861, peasants' flying to neighbouring villages also resulted in bad condition in agriculture. The *ryots* and the villagers abandoned their villages and took asylum at distant place where they were safe.

As a result of the outbreak of 1861, the gap between the ruler and the ruled widened. The peasants had to lose their bargaining power and thus chances of removing their grievances lost. The ruled, therefore, developed a deep racial bitterness towards the ruler viz. English and opposed the inferior status granted to them.

As the economy still remained in a state of non-monetization and the money remained a scarce commodity with the people, the suppression of the indigenous production of opium would certainly induce the opium eaters to offer themselves as labourers in the tea gardens of the Europeans.¹¹⁹

After 1861, the number of force was increased in Nowgong and its neighbouring areas to strengthen the British control over the land and to create a sense of fear among the restless *ryots*. The authorities, being alarmed at the rapid growth of public awakening, often resorted to brutal repression.¹²⁰ Moreover, following the Phulaguri episode, the government held enquiries into the affairs and adopted certain measures to remove the apprehension of the people by taking action on the officers found guilty, where it was considered necessary.¹²¹

The administration did not stop the enhancement of revenue, nor the supply of government opium. They did not give importance on the dissatisfaction of the *ryots* and kept on collecting high rate of revenue even after 1861. Henry Hopkinson, the

Commissioner of Assam proposed, in May 1861 to double the revenues on land to devote the excess to the construction of works of Public utility. It was considered however inexpedient to enhance the revenue on land as proposed by him. The Secretary of State too on the recommendation of the government of India accorded his approval to the appropriation of 3 percent of the revenues for purpose of local improvement, but the question of increase in assessment was left to the discretion of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal.¹²²

The community worse-affected in the outbreak of 1861 was the *Lalungs*. Other non-*Lalung* communities also got badly affected by the outbreak of 1861.¹²³ The outbreak of 1861 did not invite any single act of protest from any section of the indigenous population. This as well as the participation of the men of the fishing community among others, added strength and widened the mass base of the movement.¹²⁴

The outbreak of 1861 was suppressed ruthlessly. Many became martyrs, many injured, and many lost their properties. The suppression of the revolt caused great indignation throughout the province. The resistance movement launched by the *Raijmels* had its impact throughout the province. The government of India conceded to the partial reduction of the rates of assessment.

Though quelled with brute force, the uprising not only exposed the defects of the British rule but also proved beyond doubt that any attempts at socio-economic reconstruction without corresponding improvement in the moral and material condition of the people was bound to be abortive.¹²⁵

Though the uprising was not tangibly successful, these reflected the Colonial oppression on the peasantry and the determination of the peasantry to combat against the Colonial land revenue system.¹²⁶

The government became cruel upon the leaders of the *Mels* when they began to raise their voice against the measures of the government. Therefore, sweet relation between the ruler and the ruled turned sour in the later part of their rule.

No event, small or big, goes without importance and significance and the uprising of 1861 is no exception to it. Significance of the outbreak of 1861 lies in the fact that all sections irrespective of caste, economic position, religion, age and sex united under one

roof to combat against the Colonial force forgetting factions and factionalism among them. Illiterate tribal peasants gave leadership in the outbreak of 1861 without elite leadership. When educated and wealthy sections and government employees tolerated the exploitation of the government and remained silent, the rural people with their *Raij mels* protested the policy of the government and took the path of revolt. It was not a little matter to be averted. The Colonial Consortium could realize the united strength and courage of the peasants in their revolt. This outbreak gave moral strength and courage to the peasants of Darrang and Kamrup in later period and influenced the future course of action. The peasants were no longer afraid to question the government for any injustice done to them. One important and significant aspect to be noticed in the outbreak of 1861 was the participation of the men of the fishing community who gave strength and wide-base to the movement.¹²⁷ In spite of having economic and social disparity, the poor peasantry did not revolt against the rich peasantry may be because of same land, same culture and same men. They rather fought jointly and unitedly against the government. Two Tamil peasant castes – *Vellalas* and *Padaiyachis* wanted to be recorded as higher *varna*. The *Vellalas* wanted to be called as *Vaishyas* while the *Padaiyachis* as *Vanniya Kula Kshatriyas*.¹²⁸ But no such upgradation mentality was seen among the *Lalung* and *Kachari* peasants of Phulaguri in 1861.

Unlike some parts of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, *Brahmins* were not found working as tenants of Non-*Brahmins* in Nowgong or in entire Assam. Rather the *Brahmins* and the higher castes they got their land ploughed through their tenants and labour. But in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, *Brahmin* were occasionally found working as tenants of *Rajputs* or *Jat* Landowners.¹²⁹ Another significant aspect of the revolt of 1861 is that had the peasants of Phulaguri accepted the government's verdict like the *ryots* of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara, then there would have no peasants revolt in Phulaguri. Their denial to government's verdict gave birth to revolt in Phulaguri.¹³⁰ Phulaguri revolt was not a mere revolt fought in between the ruler and the ruled. It was the first mass-revolt against the Colonial government and was a united effort of the exploited mass for the eradication of their exploitation.¹³¹ Though they failed, significance lies in the fact that the peasants by their revolt wanted to compel the

government to yield to the will of the people by the withdrawal of unpopular measures of taxation and Colonial exploitation.

Now there comes the most pertinent question whether the outbreak of 1861 is justifiable. Many have given so many opinions. And keeping them all in view, let us now come to a better justified position on the very issue. The demands of the peasants were real, not sentimental. The burden pressed upon the land was heavier than on land owned by *Zamindars* in Bengal. So their revolt against the authority would totally be justified. The consumption of opium is bad and injurious to health. Despite that, its sudden prohibition within few months cannot be justified what the people consumed for several generations. At least for its abolition, it should have been the duty of the government to take short and long-term plan and also the government ought to have the opium-eaters mentally prepared for avoiding this type of drugs. The colonial government blamed the peasants of Assam while exonerating itself for all acts of omission and commission but the coercive measures undertaken to suppress the popular revolt could not but tarnish the fair name of any civilized government.¹³² The rightful demands of the ruled placed before the ruler for compliance and consideration could not be a crime for using lethal weapons. The so-called civilized colonial government could have discarded the mass-slaughtering with patient consideration adopting give and take policy instead of shooting and slaughtering the mass people indiscriminately. A black spot on the civilized British nation was, of course, not desired by the British commons, but caused by some of their trigger happy cynics without trying to understand the wants of their subjects.¹³³ Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant General of Bengal, was convinced that if the *ryots* had been properly tackled by the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong by personally meeting and attending to their grievances, they would have in all probability peacefully dispersed and accepted the unavoidable financial measures of the government.¹³⁴ But his deputation of the police and subsequently of an inexperienced young officer with so small a force and without clear instruction to him not to resort to coercive measures was an act of great imprudence.¹³⁵ The revolt of Phulaguri was a great revolt but matter of regret is that people of different parts of India knew little about this great historic episode. Surprisingly, even people of different districts of Assam also knew little about it. Probably, the Colonial government had scare in their mind spreading the impact of the

revolt on the other parts of the province. If sometime anyhow something leaked, they then tried to show it as the revolt of few opium eaters which is, indeed, unfortunate and unjustifiable.¹³⁶ The outbreak of 1861 was a dispute between the ruler and the ruled which had a tragic end. But the Colonial government tried to keep concealed the whole incident for their own interest. The countrymen and the outside world were in the dark. The dead were buried but the sins could not be!

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