

Peasant Movements (1893-94) Of Assam: Genesis and Dimensions

Shruti Dev Goswami

With the establishment of British rule in 1826, agrarian relations assumed a new dimension in Assam. In the initial stages the British refrained from making a radical change in the revenue system of their predecessors but retained it with such minor modifications which were considered absolutely necessary. A major step in this direction was, however, taken in 1833 when in parts of central Assam (former districts of Darrang and Nowgong) the land tax was for the first time introduced in place of personal labour and produces which formed the nucleus of the former system of taxation. This system, generally called the *rayatwaree* system, enabled the Government to enter into an agreement directly with the rayat, who was expected to pay only that amount as revenue which was fixed by the Government. This change in the method of payment, however, put the Assamese peasantry under severe financial strain. Since cash was difficult to obtain, the peasants had to sell a considerable part of their output to meet the revenue demand, while their consumption-oriented mode of production remained virtually unchanged. Moreover, in assessing land no uniform principle was followed; there had been numerous instances of "lighter rates having been imposed when they should have been heavier and vice versa".¹ Bearing full testimony of this anomaly, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, the doyen of nineteenth century Assamese renaissance, rightly pointed out in his well documented memorial submitted to A.J. M. Mills, Judge of the *Sudder Dewani Adalat* on deputation to Assam in 1853, that assessments were made without any particular distinction being observed as to the quality and capacity of the soil; the low *rupit* (arable) lands, yielding fifty maunds of corn per *poora* (1.5 acres approximately) were assessed at the same rate as high *rupit* lands producing only fifteen to twenty maunds. This, according to him, made the pressure of taxation "light upon some but heavy upon others."² Again, in regard to the rates of assessment no uniformity

was maintained. For example, in 1839 while the rate of *rupit* land in Darrang was Rs. 1.8 annas, in Lakhimpur and Sibsagar it was fixed at Rs.1 per *poora*.³ Similarly, the *bari* (homestead plot) lands were assessed at Re. I in Kamrup and annas 8 in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.⁴ This discrepancy in the rates being inconvenient, Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of the province, submitted a proposal in 1839 to raise the rate of *rupit* land in all the districts to the level of Darrang, which was then the highest in the province. Though the proposal was then summarily rejected as 'inexpedient' the same was renewed in a different form in 1865 by Henry Hopkinson, the new Commissioner of the province. It was effectively argued this time that in the absence of a uniform rate a tendency had lately developed among the rayats to migrate from the heavily assessed district to the one where the revenue was less. On this occasion the Government approved of the proposal and authorized the Commissioner to raise the rate of *rupit* and *non-rupit* lands considerably in all the districts.⁵ This periodical enhancement of land revenue was made in spite of the fact that the rayats were overburdened with numerous other taxes⁶ and any alterations in the rates would greatly unsettle their domestic economy. Already in 1853 Dhekial Phukan drew the attention of the Government to the increasing difficulties of the Assamese rayats and earnestly appealed that before any enhancement of revenue was decided upon in future the Government must ensure a corresponding improvement in the paying capacity of the people. "Unless therefore", he cautioned, "the Government provides the people with better and improved means of cultivating their lands, an increase of assessment will inevitably lead to an increase of the unhappiness of the people."⁷

That Dhekial Phukan's assessment was correct none can deny. In the prevailing situation peasant movements were inevitable and already in October, 1861, the Tiwa (previously called Lalung) community of Phulaguri, near Raha in Nowgong district was in a fierce rebellion against the district authorities.⁸ As in later times the leading part in this uprising was played by the *raij mels*, which, with the blessings of the village elders and other respectable persons of the locality, were to a great extent successful in rallying the masses against the district officers. A *mel* in Assam was a 'time-honoured

institution' and a 'recognised feature' of the Assamese social life, for, in a period when legal and constitutional safeguard was unthinkable, it was the only means through which the people could obtain protection from the oppression of the local functionaries.⁹ Thus, in the last decade of the nineteenth century when agrarian situation became serious, a number of *mels* were formed in different parts of the districts of Kamrup and Darrang and with the support of some well-to-do (including the *Dolois* and the *Gossains*, meaning spiritual guides) people a no-rent campaign was started.¹⁰ Well organised and always well attended, these *mels* provided ample opportunities to the aggrieved rayats of the two districts not only to discuss their problems and means of redress but also to develop a spirit of independence and self--reliance.¹¹ The *mels*, therefore, once again took a leading part in the peasant movements of late nineteenth century Assam and no rayat dared to disobey the decisions of the *mels* without facing social ostracism and other penaldes.¹² The local authorities unfortunately remained indifferent to the problems of the peasants but often took recourse to brutal suppression of the *mels* with a view to nip the spirit of unity of the peasantry in the bud.

It was, however, not the increasing burden of taxation which alone the rayats resented. In pre-British times, land in Assam was owned collectively by a clan or community, each adult member of the clan was given two *pooras* (approximately three acres) of revenue-free land in lieu of personal service to the state. With the establishment of British rule certain administrative changes were effected, the most important of which' was, as stated already, the replacement of manual service by a money tax. This change, unfortunately, failed to produce 'either an adequate pecuniary collection to the Government or satisfaction to the people.' Moreover, no concrete step was taken to protect the rayats from the extortion of the revenue collectors, nor any accurate accounts taken of the collections actually made.¹³ "Even persons of intelligence", wrote Archibold Bogle, the Collector of Kamrup, "would be puzzled to say how much a rayot would have to pay to the Government. To the unfortunate peasantry the account must have been wholly incomprehensible."¹⁴ Similarly, keeping the experience of the Bengal system

in mind Dhēkial Phukan expressed great concern at the lack of adequate protection of the tenants when he wrote,

Often, too, the fiscal officers cause an over-assessment of the Ryots' lands by false statements in the survey papers; and cases are not of infrequent occurrence in which the Mofussil revenue officers are guilty of levying a general cess or other illegal impositions for their private use. It would be easy to say that redress of these grievances might easily be obtained by application to the courts. We have, however, to observe that none but the poor Ryots themselves can feel how many insurmountable obstacles lie in their way to redress; that a civil or summary prosecution for damages, exactions, or dispossession, is actually beyond their means; and that they are obliged to submit to loss and privation rather than leave their cultivations and sojourn half a year at the distance of eighty miles to obtain an award for damages.¹⁵

True, many of these defects were removed by the Settlement Rules of 1870 and subsequently in 1886 by the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations. But the demand of the state had increased to such an extent that whatever benefit the rayats derived from these regulations had all been neutralised. The risks of tax collection being enormous and the commission allowed being extremely meager the tax collectors were forced to exact the uttermost farthing from the ryots.¹⁶ The fact that rural poverty in Assam was increasing can also be explained by the increase in the number of tax-defaulters which grew from 3,311 in 1879-80 to nearly 13,000 in 1895-96.¹⁷ This, coupled with the high mortality owing to the devastating black fever (*kalaazar*) epidemic between 1891-1901¹⁸ and excessive consumption of opium¹⁹ made the conditions of the peasantry extremely deplorable.

Thus, agriculture and market facilities being in a backward state and commerce being entirely in the hands of the Manvari (Keya) merchants, the average Assamese peasant in the late nineteenth century had very little savings even in the most normal

times. Circumstances compelled him to remain satisfied with the few maunds of paddy and some vegetables which he produced in his own garden. His mode of cultivation was primitive, the implements he used in tilling the land were of "the rudest and simplest kind", irrigation and flood control measures rarely practised and manure seldom used in agriculture. Paucity of capital and enterprise rather than land continued to be widely felt. His primary concern, under the circumstances, was for the present as scarcely was there a surplus for him and in the event of the failure of crops owing to natural calamities, he was reduced to complete "wretchedness and misery."²⁰

II

In this back drop of events let us study the nature and magnitude of the peasant movements of 1893-94. The ostensible and immediate cause of unrest was undoubtedly the steep rise in the rate of land revenue which in the settlement of 1893 was raised by about 53 per cent on the average, but in some areas it was as high as 70 to 100 per cent.²¹ A revision in the rate had become necessary for two principal reasons. Firstly, the decennial settlement effected in 1883 had expired on 31 March, 1893 and secondly, the rate then in force was fixed some twenty-five years ago, and which in the opinion of the local authorities had "failed to secure to Government its fair share of the produce of the land."²² Though in this settlement the three-fold classification of land was retained, the villages were now divided into four classes and the revenue was fixed on each of the three kinds of land on the basis of the class in which the village fell. Again, the main consideration of determination of the class of the village was the demand of land as shown by the density of population and the proportion of the settled to the total area. Moreover, no distinction was observed between the better and the inferior land of the same class in a village.²³ Assessment in such a situation was not likely to be accurate. Be that as it may, this measure of the Government created great apprehension and resentment among the masses, nearly eighty-five per cent of whom, according to the census of 1891, lived on agriculture. Almost everywhere the rayats raised a storm of protest demanding the repeal of the enhancement order. While on a tour of the

Brahmaputra valley districts in the winter of 1893, the Chief Commissioner of the province, W. E. Ward, received a number of complaints in this regard.²⁴ But nowhere the situation became so explosive as in Rangia and Lachima in the Kamrup district and Patharughat in the Mangaldoi sub-division of Darrang district, where an unprecedented scene of an impending upheaval was witnessed, and which forced the Chief Commissioner to promptly reduce the increase to an average of 37 per cent.²⁵ The infuriated rayats were not satisfied by this abatement and demanded that collections in the enhanced rate be postponed till the final orders were passed by the Government of India. Unfortunately, the Chief Commissioner remained adamant and insisted on timely payment of revenue in the rates already announced, assurance being given at the same time that in the event of a diminution of the rates being ordered by the government of India the excess payment made by the rayats would be refunded.²⁶

III

The earliest signs of disaffection of a serious nature were witnessed in Rangia and Lachirna in December, 1893. A vigorous no-rent campaign was launched in both the places and the peasants were warned that any attempt to pay revenue would be treated as a gross disrespect shown to the *mels*.²⁷ Caught in a dilemma of losing property if they failed to pay and on the other hand of being 'cursed and excommunicated' in case they did so, the poor villagers did not know what to do. Who was superior - the Government or the *mel*, was the question which they were unable to answer.²⁸

At about 9 A.M. of 24 December, 1893, an unruly crowd of about 250 men raided the Rangia *hat* (market) and destroyed property worth Rs. 300/-. It is interesting to note here that the wrath of the raiders were directed not against the Government alone but also against the Marwari traders as evidenced from the destruction and looting of the shops owned by these people on the pretext that "their presence had caused the enhancement of land revenue."²⁹ Encouraged by the inability of the small police force under Reilly, Assistant Superintendent of Police, Kamrup, to suppress the riot, the insurgents appeared again in much bigger number on the 30th December and threatened

to attack the *thana* (police outpost) and the office and residence of the *tahsildar* (officer in charge of revenue collection in a *tahsil* or revenue circle). Apprehending further trouble, R.B. McCabe, Deputy Commissioner of the district, arrived at the scene of the disturbance on the 6th January, 1894, along with a police party and succeeded in arresting some of the offenders involved in the incident of 24th December. But the crowd grew in strength and in the evening of 10th January, 1894, about 3000 rayats, representing all the *mouzas* (fiscal units) of the Rangia *tahsil* began to assemble in the premises of the *thana*, where, in addition to fifteen arrested culprits, a sum of Rs. 34,000 (being the amount collected from the Tamulpur *tahsil*) had been kept. The Deputy Commissioner first tried to dissuade the people from collecting in large number and becoming unnecessarily excited by pointing out to the order that he had passed on that day prohibiting the holding of the mels.³⁰ But in spite of his request the people refused to disperse and began to shout '*Bridhi Khajana Dibo Nawaru*' (We can not pay revenue at the enhanced rate).³¹ At about 9 P.M. the mob became restless and started moving towards the *thana* with a view to releasing the prisoners detained therein. The Deputy Commissioner, with the help of Reilly and a few police constables tried to frustrate their attack by opposing them with arms. In the melee that followed, McCabe got accidentally separated from the police party that accompanied him and it was with great difficulty that he could be finally rescued from the mob. In the process a few shots were fired though no one was injured.³² It was undoubtedly a very unfortunate incident and could have been avoided if both the parties would have maintained utmost restraint in their temperament. In the words of a modern writer: "To McCabe the demeanour of the people appeared to be extremely insolent, to the people McCabe's effrontery was the symbol of a tyrannical rule".³³

The bold defiance of the peasants at Rangia compelled McCabe to take a serious view of the situation. The incident was not an accidental one; it was planned in advance. Realising that the exasperations of the rayats were too deep-rooted to be removed by mere assurances, the Deputy Commissioner decided to meet the situation

by fortifying the *thana* with additional troops. Accordingly a message was sent to the Darranga frontier out-post to immediately send fifteen sepoy of the 13th Bengal Infantry to Rangia. Almost simultaneously a telegram was sent to the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang district to despatch twenty frontier policemen. Meanwhile it was deemed necessary to defend the Cutchery (court building) from any possible attack. Steps were also taken to prevent disaffection from spreading into the neighbouring areas and as a prohibitory measure orders were issued on the 13th January for the attachment of all licensed guns in Rangia, Nalbari, Barama and Bajali *tahsils*, all forming a compact block and where the inhabitants had already decided on a common course of action. Some local leaders, not connected with the outbreak, were sent to the disturbed areas as special constables to induce the rebels to obey the orders of the district officer and to cooperate with him in maintaining peace.³⁴ The success of these measures were questionable as though at Rangia out of an estimated amount of Rs.90, 000 a sum of nearly Rs.60, 000 was collected within a few days, in Nalbari, Barama and Bajali the people continued to resist payment. In Barama, in particular, the *mels* were held almost regularly in spite of the prohibitory order. They appointed their own *dak* (postal) peons “to carry orders from one village to another, and organised a corps of *lathials* (clubsmen) to oppose attachment of property.”³⁵

While steps were being taken at Rangia to restore law and order a serious insurrection took place on 21 January, 1894 at Lachima, about thirty miles west of Rangia. The trouble started when some people, enraged over the conduct of a *mouzadar* (officer in charge of *mouza* or fiscal unit) and a *mandal* (a surveyor of land) engaged in revenue collection duty, assaulted them so badly that the latter died of the wounds that he had sustained.³⁶ Hearing about this disturbance the Extra Assistant Commissioner of Barpeta immediately sent an Inspector of Police to the place. The officer initially succeeded in apprehending seventy-five suspected culprits; but soon he was overpowered by a mob of about 3,000 men and the captives were freed. The situation there having gone out of control, an urgent request for assistance was sent to Gauhati

the following day. With a few sepoy's McCabe arrived at Lachima in the midnight of 22nd January. There was practically no resistance from the people when fifty-nine principal offenders were taken to custody for interrogation. But in the afternoon of 25th January a huge demonstration was organised in front of the Deputy Commissioner's camp and a petition demanding the release of the arrested persons and believed to have been signed by 6,000 rayats was submitted to him. The Deputy Commissioner declined to accede to their demand and tried to satisfy them by an assurance that any remission of revenue made by the Government of India would be at once refunded. He also pointed out that the rayats by occupying land after 1st April, 1893, had indirectly accepted the new settlement rules and the authorities were duty bound to serve *bakizai* (recovery of arrears of revenue) notices to those who had defaulted with payment.³⁷ All these efforts to pacify the people proved unsuccessful, whereupon the police took upon itself the duty of dispersing the crowd with a view to preventing any possible attempt to advance upon the Deputy Commissioner's rest camp. Not a single shot was fired; the butt of the rifle was enough to break the assembly.³⁸ Unfortunately, the district authorities here resorted to inhuman suppression of public protest. In the name of 'public interest' even the *Gossains*, the *Dolois* and the village headmen were not spared. Large number of suspected criminals were yoked to the plough like bullocks and were compelled to draw it across the field.³⁹ It is strange that O'Dwyerism was practised here in its worst form without even an O'Dwyer.⁴⁰ Police atrocity finally succeeded in restoring peace at Lachima. This prompted the Deputy Commissioner to send a part of the police force to Bajali and Barama from where information regarding secret assembly of men continued to come. Meanwhile, he undertook a visit to a number of adjoining villages to explain to the people 'the futility of active resistance' and all this he could do without noticing any sign of disloyalty. He was happy to report on 22nd February, 1894.

No ill-will is (now) borne against the Government officials, and in every place I have seen the native gentlemen have called to thank me for the extreme leniency with which Government has acted towards the misguided people.⁴¹

IV

The echo of the peasant uprisings was soon heard at Patharughat, about twelve miles to the east of the Kamrup border. It was on 24th January, 1894, the Deputy Commissioner of the district, J.D. Anderson, first heard about a *mel* in the Sipajhar area which was attended by thousands of rayats coming even from distant places like Mangaldoi and Kolaigaon, and where matters relating to the recent enhancement of land revenue had been discussed. Receiving positive information of similar *mels* being convened at Patharughat where the peasants had been very much agitated over the last few days and apprehending a Rangia-type situation there, the Deputy Commissioner, accompanied by J.R. Berrington, Officiating Commandant of Military Police, and about thirty sepoy arrived at Patharughat on 27th January, 1894. While he was coming to Patharughat the Deputy Commissioner saw a number of notices, issued on behalf of the 'raj' being pasted on the trunks and branches of the trees from which he came to know that the proposed *mel* would be held on the 28th January. The purpose of this *mel* was to demonstrate the determination of the peasants to resist payment at the enhanced rate, and if possible, to present their grievances to the Deputy Commissioner with the hope that he might be able to reduce the burden at his own discretion (*Kijani khajana bridhi nakare*).⁴²

There was no apparent indication of an impending danger when Anderson reached Patharughat and possibly the situation there would have remained well under control had he been informed in advance about the dissatisfaction which was fast spreading among the rayats, and he, on his part, would have refrained from doing something which would add fuel to the fire. Strangely, without caring to have a more detailed knowledge of the sufferings of the people the Deputy Commissioner decided to enforce law on the guilty persons perhaps under the erroneous belief that no one would dare to lay violent hands on his officers. Instead of persuading the angry rayats not to be carried away by the conviction that the Government was unsympathetic to their difficulties he made things more complicated for him by foolishly sending in the

morning of 28th January the local *tahsildar* along with Berrington and a few sepoys to distraint the properties of the rayats on whom *bakizai* notices were served. This action of the officer further infuriated the villagers who had great dislike for the police. They, therefore, not only resisted attachment of property but also started collecting in large number in front of the rest-house where the Deputy Commissioner was staying. An attempt was first made to explain to the people the futility of such resistance as the matter was then under the consideration of the Government of India. The agitators were not satisfied and continued to squat on the ground insisting on an immediate cancellation of the enhancement order.⁴³ This defiant attitude of the people was too much for Anderson to bear. He asked the police to drive them from near the rest-house into the open field on the other side of the Mangaldoi road, completely forgetting that he was thereby trying to deal with an angry crowd with a small force. Hardly had the police carried out the orders of the Deputy Commissioner, sounds of a 'fresh mob' approaching the bungalow were heard. It was too late for the officer to realize that the situation had suddenly taken a new turn as many of the new comers had come armed with *lat is* (clubs) and spilt bamboos.⁴⁴ A scuffle had become inevitable. It is difficult to say who provoked whom. But the sight of the police advancing towards the 'excited crowd' with 'fixed bayonets' undoubtedly infuriated them more. At the same time the rebels, drawing strength from their 'overwhelming number', were also very confident of the success of their agitation. Be that as it may, what followed on that fateful day can be better realized than described. The people fought a pitched battle (*doli ran*) with bamboo-sticks and clods of earth. The police replied with volleys of gun-shots, killing at least fifteen and injuring not less than thirty-seven.⁴⁵ Fighting a grim battle with remarkable determination the crowd finally gave in and retired to safety. A summary trial was then arranged. Thirty-seven persons were tried; of these seven were found guilty and convicted and the rest discharged.⁴⁶ Thus, in the face of naked repression the resistance movement died down though in some parts of the district the rayats continued to 'maintain a hostile and defiant attitude' for a long time. In these places the people

Patharughat uprising, would have been enough to curb the violent and hostile attitude of the people rather than the extreme step the Deputy Commissioner chose to take.⁵⁶

Conclusion:

The wide-spread peasant struggles, 'based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non-cultivating landowners', introduced a new era of peasant awakening in Assam by effectively upholding the value and utility of organised resistance to governmental injustice. The emerging middle class made common cause with the peasants and helped them keep alive their nascent spirit, though the emphasis was gradually shifted from militant to a constitutional path of agitation. The popular *raij mels* were converted into more representative and broad-based organisations - the Rayat *Sob has* (associations), with active support of the Assamese middle class. The Tezpur Rayat *Sabha*, for example, did not fail to ventilate the growing dissatisfaction of the rayats. Among its various activities the most important was the agrarian reforms. Similarly, the Nowgong Rayat *Sabha* and the Upper Assam Association, both born in the late 1880's, had large number of members from among the rayats of the respective areas. Still later, under the influence of the Indian National Congress, a number of peasant organizations were formed in remote areas like Charduar, Naduar, Sootia and Choyduar in the Darrang district.⁵⁷ Let alone the Rayat *Sobhas*, an elite organization like the Jorhat Sarbojanik *Sabha*, founded in 1884, boldly took up the cause of the peasants and organised public opinion in their favour. Between October, 1892 and February, 1893, the *Sobha* held a series of meetings to "protest against the policy of the Government for an excessive increase of revenue".⁵⁸ No wonder, therefore, a number of its members were seen actively supporting the cause of the struggling rayats and its President, Jagannath Barooah, even went to the extent of hiring, at his own expense, lawyers from Calcutta for the release of the arrested leaders of upper Assam.⁵⁹ Thus, peasant movements in Assam did not remain confined to the rural areas; but with the progress of time the urban elite began to make "a united front with the proprietary peasants on all common issues against the rulers."⁶⁰ The unity of purpose and idea,

which was the fountain-head of strength of the Assamese peasantry, found a new direction thereafter.

The peasant movements of late nineteenth century Assam did not remain essentially a local or provincial issue but with the interest shown by the all-India press and more particularly by his open advocacy and sympathy that Dr. Rash Behary Ghose had shown in course of his speech at the Imperial Legislative Assembly on 29 March, 1894, the so called 'Assam Riots' gained the publicity which they rightly deserved. It is true the replies given by the Government on that occasion were mostly unsatisfactory⁶¹ and evasive in character as they did not underline any definite policy towards the Assam rayats. But still, by lifting a local issue from the regional to the national platform the cause of the toiling masses of Assam was remarkably served. The hushed voice of the peasantry began to find a new expression. It is perhaps due mainly to the increasing awareness of the Assamese rayats that at the time of the next resettlement (1905) the lessons of 1893-94 riots were not entirely lost sight of.

Notes and References:

1. Assam Secretariat Records (hereafter ASR), Letters Issued to Government, Vol. 44, January-April, 1872, Hopkinson to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, 6 April, 1872
2. Dhekial Phukan, A., 'Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam', in Mills, A.J.M., *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854, Appendix J, p. XXXI.
3. Jenkins, F., 'Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam, 1849', in *Selection of Records of the Government of Bengal*, No. xi, Calcutta, 1853. The districts mentioned here and hereafter were the former districts of the province. The boundaries of some of these districts have been reorganised in recent times to form new districts. Accordingly old names and spellings of the districts are retained.
4. *Ibid*

5. For details see Barpujari, H.K. (ed.), *Political History of Assam, 1826-1919*, vol. I, Gauhati, 1977, p. 245, Appendix A

It is to be noted here that the incidence of land revenue per head of population in Assam was much heavier than in Bengal. Bengal Revenue Proceedings, November, 1874, Head No.7, Collection 1-176, Secretary of State for India to Governor-General of India in Council, 14 May, 1874.

6. In addition to the land revenue and the salt duty, the people of Assam were required to pay income tax (after 1860), *ahkaree* (excise), stamp duty (after 1858), *gorkhati* (tax for cutting wood in the jungle), *jalkar* (tax for the right to catch fish), tax for washing gold in the auriferous streams, tax for the privilege to catch elephants and in the hill areas the house or the hoe tax. For details see Goswami; Shrutidev, *Aspects of Revenue Administration in Assam, 1826-1874*, Delhi, 1987.

7. Dhekial Phukan, A, *op. cit.*, p. xxxviii.

8. For details of the Phulaguri Uprising see Goswami, Shrutidev, 'Raij versus the Raj: The Nowgong Outbreak (1861) in Historical Perspective', in Bhattacharjee, J.B. (ed;), *Studies in the History of North-East India*, Shillong, 1986, pp. 123-34.

9. ASR (Commissioner's Office), File No. 409, 1861-63, Hopkinson to Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 8 November, 1861.

10. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 252, McCabe to Commissioner of Assam, 12 January, 1894; also Guha, A, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 51.

11. The popular aphorism *raijai raja* (the people alone are the sovereigns) could be understood in this context.

12. Dutt, K.N., *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, Gauhati (reprint), 1969, pp.32-33.

13. Foreign Political Consultations, 30 May, 1833, No. 89, Bogle to Robertson, 10 February, 1833.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Dhekial Phukan, A., *op. cit.*, p. xxxv.

16. Quoted in Guha, A., 'Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: Roots, Structure and Trends', in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. xvii, No.1 (January-March 1980), pp. 38-39.
17. Sarma, Manorama, 'Socio-Economic Changes in Assam, 1870-1900', in *North-East Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No.2 (November 1982), pp. 56-57. The figures given here were related to Lower Assam and Central Assam (districts of Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang) alone and not to the whole of the province.
18. During this period the decrease of population was estimated at 7 per cent in Kamrup, 25 per cent in Nowgong and 9 per cent in the Mangaldoi sub-division of the Darrang district. Guha, A., 'Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: Roots, Structures and Trends', in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. xvii, No.1 (January-March 1980), p. 39.
19. The consumption of *ahkaree* (excise) opium in Assam rose from 1,446 maunds in 1885-86 to 1,748 maunds in 1919-20. For other details of the opium evil see Goswami, Shrutidev, 'The Opium Evil in Nineteenth Century Assam', in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. xix, Nos. 3 & 4, 1982, pp. 365-76.
20. Dhekial Phukan, A., *op.cit.*, p. xxxviii.
21. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 326, see Questions put by Rash Behary Ghose at the Imperial Legislative Council and Answers given, 29 March, 1894.
22. *Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the year 1893-94*, Shillong, 1895, p. viii.
23. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. vi, New Delhi (reprint), year not mentioned, p.91.
24. *Royal Commission on Opium, Minutes of Evidence*, Vol. ii, Calcutta, 1894, p. 278, See evidence of I.J.S. Driberg, 27 December, 1893.

25. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 326, see Questions put by Rash Behary Ghose at the Imperial Legislative Council and Answers given, 29 March, 1894.
26. *Ibid*, No. 286, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 12 February, 1894.
27. *Ibid*, No. 258, Diary of McCabe, 6 January, 1894.
28. *Ibid*, No. 286, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 12 February, 1894.

R.B. McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup believed that the majority of the rayats were eager to pay revenue at the revised rate; but they were prevented from doing that by the influential leaders of the locality. "How can we disobey the *Raijar Hukum*. (order of the *mel*) - was the usual expression of helplessness of the rayats. *Ibid*, No. 252, McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam, 12 January, 1894.

Similarly, in a statement made before McCabe, Bijoy Chaudhuri, a tenant of Pati Darrang *tahsil* (revenue circle), reported that on 22 December, 1893, one Monu Gaon *burah* approached him with a message that he had been summoned by the *mel* (*Raij nibo diche*). When he arrived at the place of the *mel* he saw a number of influential persons of the area who on seeing him began to reproach him for paying revenue against the wishes of the *mel* and asked him to pay Rs. 25/- as a penalty. On being informed that he did not have the money with him he was told that he must pay by Thursday next, or his house would be looted. The unfortunate villager had no power to defy the orders of the *mel* and paid the fine. *Ibid*, No. 253, Memo by McCabe, 11 January, 1894.

29. *Ibid*, No. 352, McCabe-to Commissioner of Assam, 12 January, 1894.
30. The order banning the holding of the *mels* read as follows: "Whereas the assembly of *mels* in the district of Kamrup had resulted in riot and criminal intimidation, it is hereby ordered that no *mel* shall assemble within the *tahsils* of Patidarrang, Rangia, Nalbari, Tambulpur, Hajo, Boroma and Bajali, or in the *mouza* of Shurukhetri without the permission of the Deputy Commissioner. Any person joining such assembly after the issue of the notice will be punished according to law." *Ibid*, No. 257, Notice by McCabe, 10 January, 1894.

31. *Ibid*, No. 258, Diary of McCabe, 8 January, 1894.
32. *Ibid*, No. 221, see Telegram of McCabe to Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 10 January, 1894; also, *The Hindu Patriot*, 5 February 1894.
33. Dutt, K.N., *op.cit.*, p. 34.
34. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 312, McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 22 February, 1894.
35. *Ibid* 36. *Ibid*
37. *Ibid*, The rules usually followed in such cases were as follows: If the revenue was not paid in time a first notice was served to the defaulter. Following this two more notices were issued and in the event of his failure to clear his dues after the third notice, his property was attached.
38. *Ibid*
39. Dutt, K.N., *op.cit.*, p. 35.
40. Michael O'Dwyer was the Lt. Governor of the Punjab at the time of World War I. His policy of repression and inhuman physical torture was the chief cause of unrest in that province, culminating in the tragic Jallianwala Bagh massacre (13 April, 1919). O'Dwyerism, therefore, had become a symbol of ruthlessness in India.
41. ASR, Home 'A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 312, McCabe to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 22 February, 1894.
42. *Ibid*, No. 277, Anderson to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 30 January, 1894.
43. *Ibid*.
44. *Ibid*.
45. *Ibid*, No. 320, Godfrey to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 March, 1894; also *The Hindu Patriot*, 5 February, 1894.

This figure was later contested in unofficial circles. Berrington who carried out the firing orders himself testified in his statement recorded on that day that it was impossible to ascertain the exact number of casualties from a distance of about 250 yards. That the number of the wounded was more was proved by the fact that special

constables were asked to persuade the destitute to take the injured persons to the Mangaldoi dispensary as there were no medical facilities available at Patharughat. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 279, Statement of Berrington, 28 January, 1894.

46. *Ibid*, No. 320, Godfrey to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 March, 1894.
41. Guha, A., *Planter Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 54.
48. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No.326, see Questions put by Rash Behary Ghose at the Imperial Legislative Council and the Answer given, 29 March, 1894.
49. Quoted in Barpujari, H.K. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 101.
50. *The Reis and Rayyet*, 10 February, 1894, p. 62, Quoted in *Ibid*, p.101.
51. It is unfortunate that notwithstanding having full knowledge of the distress of the peasants a section of the British officials was inclined to believe that there was no reasonable justification for them to oppose the financial measures of the Government and that the majority of the rayats were willing to pay their revenue but they were frightened into refusing payment by the *mels*.
52. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No. 320, Godfrey to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 March, 1894.
53. *Ibid*.
54. Strangely, an attempt was made to whitewash the responsibilities of the Deputy Commissioner and his subordinates by throwing the entire burden on the *raij mels* or on some of the viUage headmen who were held guilty of spreading ri.Jmours and willfully misleading the poor cultivators. Even a man like Sir W.E. Ward, the Chief Commissioner of the province, supported Anderson and opined that he was "fully justified in the action he took". *Ibid*, No. 286, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 12 February, 1894.

55. *Ibid*, No. 320, Godtley to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 March, 1894.
56. It is not known if there existed a direct understanding between the peasants of Kamrup and those of the Darrang district. The bold resistance of the former might have indirectly, if not directly, inspired their brothers in Patharughat to rise against their rulers. It may also be possible that the rayats in the latter place, keeping the lessons of Rangia and Lachima in mind, were encouraged to believe, foolishly though, that the police would cause no harm to them and that even if they fired, they would use only blank cartridges.
57. Barpujari, H.K. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 159, foot note.
58. *Royal Commission on Opium. Minutes of Evidence*, Vol. ii, Calcutta, 1894, p.299, see evidence of Jagannath Barooah, 28 December, 1893.
59. Goswami, Jatindranath, *Jagannath Barooah* (in Assamese), Jorhat, 1976, p. 40
60. Guha, A., *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-47*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 62.
61. ASR, Home A Proceedings, September, 1894, No.326, see Questions put by Rash Behary Ghose at the Imperial Legislative Council and Replies given, 29 March, 1894.