

CHAPTER – FIVE

RAIJ-MELS:

ROLE IN THE PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM

A *mel* in Assam was a 'time honoured institution' and a 'recognized feature' of the Assamese social life, for it was the only means through which people could obtain protection from the oppression of the local functionaries.¹ Etymologically, *mel* means a meeting; an assembly of persons coming to decide some questions. The *Mel* was a unique feature of the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people since time immemorial. Whenever there was any lapse in social behaviour in the Assamese Society, a *Mel* was summoned for the redress of the matter. The *Mel* was a local judiciary and indeed, a people's Court settled disputes at the village level.²

Raij-mel was the highest and developed form of the *Mel* system. According to Maccabe, an English Official, *gaon-panchayat* organized with the object of social issue developed gradually and took the name of *Raij-mel* later on. He described the *Raij-mel* as an embodiment of collective strength of the people.³

The peasant uprisings of the late 19th century Assam were the anti-imperialist struggle against the Colonial rule. The *Raij-mel* forming the anti-imperialist struggle were the outcome of the long drawn social customs and tradition of the people of the region and not the sudden outbursts of national feelings.⁴ Like the *Mels*, the *Raij-mel* also played a conspicuous role in the 19th century Assam. On many a times when the peasants were circumspected to colonial oppression, people resorted to *Raij-mel*. In another word, we can take the *Raij-mel* as the peasants' mobilization campaign. According to M. Sharma, 'the *Raij-mels* were institutions where the peasants were the most important participating unit.'⁵

The history of the peasant uprisings in the 19th century Assam is synonymous with the *Raij-mel*. The *Raij-mel* appears to have emerged as a social force of the peasantry first in the erstwhile Darrang district during the period of 1707-1769 against the oppressive and unbearable taxes of the Ahom monarch Lakshmi Nath Singha in 1769.

Thereafter, the *Raij-mel* became active again in Darrang in the wake of the fresh outbreak of the *Moamoria* rebellion in the reign of the king Gauri Nath Singha. Finally and gradually, the *Raij-mel* became a part and parcel of the social life of the peasantry of Nowgong and Kamrup. That the *Raij-mel* emerged as a popular forum among the peasantry in Darrang, Nowgong and Kamrup may be due to the fact that the control of the Ahoms in these districts was not so much rigorous and effective.⁶

II

The peasants-dominated *Raij-mels* were gradually replaced by the middle class dominated *Rayat Sabhas* after 1893. Towards the close of the 19th century, the popular *Raij-mels* of Assam gradually merged with the more representative and broad-based *Rayat Sabhas*.⁷ The most prominent among the *Rayat Sabhas* were Tezpur *Rayat Sabha*, Nowgong *Rayat Sabha*, Viswanath *Rayat Sabha*, Saring *Rayat Sabha*, Solaguri *Rayat Sabha*, Ganak Pukhuri *Rayat Sabha*, Na-duar *Rayat Sabha*, Jamuguri *Rayat Sabha*, Chatia *Rayat Sabha*, and Helem Kalangpar Baresaharia *Rayat Sabha*. Some of these existed since the sixties of the 19th century while others in the twenties of the 20th century.⁸

By nature, the *Raij-mels* and the *Rayat Sabhas* were anti-imperialist. In the *Raij-mels*, the peasants were more important than the leaders. But in the *Rayat Sabhas*, the leadership was more important and the peasants rarely went ahead of the leaders. Though the organization was named after *Rayat*, it did not represent *Rayats* only but the Peasantry in general, as the stratification of peasantry was not uniform. Of course, majority of the members of the *Rayat Sabhas* were of urban middle class elite.⁹

In areas, where these modern *Rayat Sabhas* and associations were in the field, no militant mass struggle on the lines of the *Raij-mels* (1893-94) ever took place.¹⁰ For example, the *Rayat Sabhas* which were active in Tezpur, Nowgong and its neighbouring places during 1893-94, did not exert any impact in Mangaldoi, Kalaigaon, Sipajhar and Patharughat of Darrang district and in the entire North Kamrup. As a result, the movements became extensive and most turbulent there. But in the same year, the

situation did not become hot in Tezpur and Nowgong due to the liberal leadership of *Rayat Sabhas*.¹¹

The *Rayat Sabhas*, besides its basic objectives, took initiative in other constructive works like construction of roads, dams to check flood erosion and also campaigned against the evils of opium-taking, drinking and gambling among the peasants. The *Sabhas* also encouraged education among the illiterate villagers. Several resolutions were also passed by different *Rayat Sabhas* demanding free grants of bamboos, thatches etc. to construct their houses, to sanction relief from auctions of their lands for non-payment of revenues, not to allow auction of their houses, cows, bullocks, golden ornaments of the women folk and utensils for non-payment of taxes.¹²

III

The aims of the *Raij-mels* was to place the social and economic problem of the people before the government. The *mels* wanted to safeguard the mutual interest of the peasants and also to protect the peasants from the oppression of the local functionaries like *Marwari* traders, *Mahajans* etc. To show the mobility and solidarity of the peasants irrespective of the caste, creed and ethnic groups was another aim of the *Raij-mels*. Actually, the *Mels* redressed the animosity and thus rebuilt the ethos of greater Assam. The other aims of the *Raij-mels* were not to yield to the government demand and compel the government to reduce the rate of revenue and also jeopardize the government asking *Ryots* not pay tax and reject auctioned properties.

The peasants take a great deal of pride in their agriculture. But their pride and prestige was endangered by the colonial apparatus by hiking revenue on their land. The *Raij-mels*, therefore, sought to restore the lost glory of the peasants at the hands of the government.

Raij-mels were well-organized and well-attended, more representative and broad based organizations. They were not planned, rather spontaneous organizations. The main strength and guiding force of the peasants' upheavals of Assam from 1861 to 1894 was the *Raij-mels*. The *Raij-mels* were formed and organized with the people of one *Tahsil* or more than that. Indeed, they were the constellation of heterogeneous assemblies of the

villagers. Moreover, the *Raij-mels* were not permanent or regular organizations of the peasantry with its functional continuity. It was convened in times of crisis or emergency when community interests were in jeopardy or required its services.¹³

One noticeable organizational feature of the *Raij-mels* was the *Dak-system* (postal system) and the *Lathials* (Clubsmen). To carry and convey their orders from village to village, the *mels* appointed its own *Dakowals* (postmen) and organized a corps of *Lathials* (Clubmen) to resist attachment of property.¹⁴ Its remains expressed that this traditionally organized system was no match to the well-equipped and better organized British machinery system for which its policy and strategy had to meet fiasco at the hands of the Colonial power.

To fetch all peasants under one roof so that all remain fastened in one thread, the leaders (*melkies*) of the *Raij-mels* adopted some strategy. To prevent the peasants from paying the hike-revenue, the leaders sometime put psychological pressure upon the peasantry. Ex-communication and social ostracism was some such strategy with which they became successful. The embodiment of the order of the *mel* 'if you pay, you are cursed and ex-communicated' created scare in the mind of the ordinary peasants and for fear of social ostracism, the peasants stopped paying revenue to the government¹⁵ and thus attempted to collapse the revenue department of the colonial government. Moreover, people boycotted *Rangia bazar* by destroying the huts and made huge loss to the government's revenue.¹⁶ To unite and fasten all the peasants, there was also the fine system. Paying hike revenue to the government was subjected to fine and considered as violation of the verdict of the *Mels*. In December, 1892, the *tahsil* of Pati Darang, Nalbari, Bajali and five other *mouzas* of upper Borbhag and Sarukhetri in their *mels* resolved and vowed not to yield to the government's demand and to fine and ostracize those who would pay revenue to the government.¹⁷

To keep the morale of the peasants unbroken and to decrease the crestfallen and dejection among the masses, *Mels* were convened secretly at night several times. Indeed, this was done at that time while Colonial atrocities went on unabated. People to evade arrest went underground in the dense forest. For instance, many went underground in the jungle of Sarthebari in 1893-94.¹⁸

Sometime some secret decisions were taken instantly in the *Raij-mel* at the time of emergency and to dispatch such secret message, therefore, to far-flung and remote villages, there was the system of *Dak* (Postal System). These *Dakowals* (Postmen) carried the messages from one village to another.¹⁹ The Faithful were appointed as *Dakowals* so that colonial spies could not entice and bribe them.

There were some peasants who for the fear of attachment of their properties wanted to pay their revenue to the government. Still then, there were others who wanted to purchase the auctioned properties of their own men what had been attached for the failure of payment of revenue arrear. To frighten both the classes of peasants in addition to some other discipline, some *Lathials* (clubmen) were appointed.

Sometime, the Colonial apparatus engaged some spies to enquire about the modus-operandi of the *Raij-mel*. These spies tried to find out the where-about of the ring leaders and had their sharp eyes on the movement of them. The local leaders, therefore, to get rid of them, shifted their place of halting frequently and even the venue of *Raij-mel* also. Most of the time, it is seen that the *Raij-mel* were convened at *Namghars* and *Masjid* (Temples & Mosques).

To us, the *melkies* (leaders) probably selected *Namghars* and *Masjid* for two reasons. Firstly, being religious place, the suspicious eyes of the Colonial spies would not fall on the *mels*. Secondly, it would be much easier for the *melkies* to unite all in such religious places and swear them in the name of God. Moreover, the leaders of the *mels* innovated the idea of mobilizing the public opinion through *Naams* (religious songs). For example, in spite of the prohibitory order of McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, *Mels* continued as usual. Stories of *Mels* being organized even thereafter by the *Gosains* and *Pathaks* through singing of *Naams* popularity called 'Rajahuwa *Naams*' (Public religious songs) have come down generations. Sindhumal Pathak, a *Barpathak* of Sarthebari *Panch Khel* seems to have innovated this idea of mobilizing public opinion through *Naams*.²⁰

Resolutions, mass-petitions and memorandum – these are some of the written weapons that the peasants placed before the Colonial authority to express their grievance and served the peasantry a lot.

One very important and noticeable thing to be mentioned is that sometime decision was made to hold the *Mel* for several days. Actually, such decision was taken at a time when the number of the peasants of other far-flung villages was less. For instance, the leaders of the Phulaguri *Raij-mel* decided to hold *Mel* for five days so that peasants from far-off villages could also attend it. This was done to enable them to take part in the deliberations.

Eric Hobsbaum says that a peasant class cannot really mobilize itself. It is always some leaders who help to raise the consciousness of the peasantry and mobilize them.²¹ Hobsbaum also says that the peasants though a potential revolutionary class, are basically a passive class and are in need of leadership.²²

Possibly, because of this, landlords and influential persons came to take the leadership of the *Raij-mels*. The historians, particularly the imperialist and the nationalist historians, have not paid much importance to study the role of the peasants and the workers. They have emphasized to study the history of the Indian masses through the eyes of the elite leadership. In Ahom period, *Mel* was organized under the leadership of *Kheldars* in Upper Assam. In Lower Assam, it was organized under the leadership of *Choudhuries*. *Choudhuries*, *Dolois* and *Gossains* were the powerful landlords who presided over the '*mel*'.²³ In Colonial period also, the character of leadership did not change altogether and remained almost the same like the Ahom period. From the meaning of the term '*Raij-mels*' as well as of its style of functioning, it seems that the leadership of the organization was collective.²⁴

R.B. McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, reported that the *Raij-mels* were governed by the *Dolois*, *Gossains* and principal landholders and they were the leaders of the movements. Thereafter, he reported that in many instances, the leaders of the *mels* were 'dismissed head constables and released convicts'.²⁵ However, from the report of the government the real and clear picture of events cannot be had. The peasants themselves also felt no necessity to write the contemporary events due to the lack of their formal education. According to the government report, the leadership of the *Raij-mels* was taken by the *Gossains*, *Dolois* and the landowners. But it can be accepted to some extent and at certain level. The leadership of the revolts of Rangia, Lachima, Phulaguri, Nalbari, Barama, Bajali, etc. were taken by the oppressed ryots. *Kaivartas*, *Tiwas* or

Lalungs, *Kachari* tribes gave the leadership of the revolts of Phulaguri and some of them even became martyrs. Martyrs of Patharughat were ordinary peasants. The rebels of Rangia revolt were mainly of *Kachari* tribes. According to M. Mukherjee, 'the no-revenue movements between 1885 and 1905 were characterized by the leadership of local notables'. One such movement was led by the rural elite in Assam (1893-94).²⁶ For example, the men who gave leadership in the *mels* of Sarukhetri were Jogeswar Goswami (Byaskuchi), Bholanath Sarma (Karakuchi), Harakanta Sarma (Helsa), Puspa Kahar (Sarthebari), Abhayram Kalita, Jadu Medhi (Sondhya), Homeswar Talukdar (Balakuchi), Bhakatram Kalita (Nankar Bhoira), Rupkanta Doloi (Guakuchi). They were all local notables.²⁷

The *Raij-mels* of 1861, 1868 and 1893-94 were in similar line with the peasants' and tribal revolts in many parts of India. The *Raij-mels* were, by nature, anti-imperialist. McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, compared the authority of *Raij-mels* to that wielded by the *Vehmgercht* (Secret Court) or to come to more modern times by the *Nihilist*.²⁸

The nature of the *Raij-mels* was like the village *Panchayat* but its activities were not confined to the *Panchayat* alone. Sometime, it became like a spokesman not only of the inhabitants of one village but the inhabitants one or even more *Tahsils*. The authority of the *Mel* had a hold in the land where the *ryots* were more important than the authority of the State. The *Raij-mels* of 1893-94 maintained strict discipline by cursing and ostracizing people who violated the discipline of the *Raij-mels*.²⁹

Ultimately, the conservative and parochial character of the *Raij-mels* began to change after the introduction of modern education. The *Raij-mels* in the greater interest of the people raised voice against injustice and thus indirectly reserved the human rights. Actually, this reveals the judiciary character of the *Raij-mels* and there is no doubt about this. The *Mels* considered the augmentation of revenue as an ominous contemplation and a faulty step. Secularism is one of the basic characteristic features of the *Raij-mels*. It had in its fold men from different ethnic groups and religious persuasions. Despite having factions and factionalism among them, the peasantry united against the government to show their solidarity and mobility for establishing their rights and liberty through *Raij-mel*.

Differences in the size of land have created diverse agricultural classes in rural society.³⁰ In spite of having variations in the peasantry, all united under one banner against *the Raj*. For instance, caste-Hindus, fishermen and *Lalung (Tiwa)* tribal people formed the core of the *Raij-mel* at Phulaguri in the district of Nowgong while caste Hindus from Brahmin to the lowest caste - Muslim and *Bodo-Kacharis* continued the *Raij-mel* in Darrang and Kamrup mostly during the period 1868-94.³¹ Thus, the *Raij-mels* was widely horizontal irrespective of caste, creed and community where the masses used to discuss their problems.

The *Raij-mels* of 1861 and the *Raij-mels* of 1893-94 were different in their nature and character. Up to 1880, either the peasants had kept low accepting their miseries as their fate or had broken out in rebellion in 1861; it was only because of their lack of proper education. But after 1880, the nature of *Raij-mels* began to change. Some educated class emerged in the scene who even took the leadership of the *Raij-mels*. When in 1886, new land laws were introduced in Assam regarding land tenures and *patta* distribution, *mels* of the people were called and from these *mels* petitions were sent to the government to reconsider the new land laws. Then again in 1893, when land revenue was enhanced, very well argued memorials were sent in the name of the *ryots* to the Chief Commissioner of Assam and to the viceroy of India.³²

IV

During the early 35 years of the British rule (1826-1860), the *Raij-mels* were the recognized features in the administration of Assam and the authority also viewed them with favour. But being hard-pressed by the defective revenue policy of the Government in later period, the peasants of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong organized through the *Raij-mels* for the redress of their grievances. The economic discontent aroused the political consciousness amongst the peasantry and the *Raij-mels* motivated them for the revolts right from Phulaguri (1861) till the revolts of Patharughat, Rangia and Lachi (1893-94). The main strength and guiding force of the peasants-uprisings of Assam from 1861 to 1894 was the *Raij-mels*. According to S.D. Goswami 'the grass-root level r

organizations like the *Raij-mels* spearheaded the resistance struggle against the repressive and exploitative action of the dominant colonial class and the power.³³

Multiplication of taxes was a serious concern to the agricultural *ryots*. The Assam administration imposed a stamp duty in 1858. Excise duty was already levied at Sadar Stations of the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. Besides the *Jalkar* for fishing in the rivers and *beels*, taxes were also levied on cutting trees, reeds and grazing. In 1852, excise opium was introduced in Assam. Income Tax was introduced in Assam in 1861. Fuel was added to the fire when the cultivation of poppy was ceased in Assam in May, 1860. It was, indeed, a major blow to the Poppy-growers, particularly, the agriculturists of the Phulaguri area in Nowgong district. The area was peopled by the tribals like the kacharis and the Lalungs. Actually, the ban on Poppy was the breach of privileges which they enjoyed since the time of the Ahoms. By that time, a rumour was surfacing that the government was pursuing a policy of taxes on their houses, *baris* and *pan* cultivation. The process of a license tax, in the meantime, confirmed their apprehension that the cultivation of betel-nut and pan be subjected to taxation which ignited the people of the area.

This was the circumstances which led to holding *Mels* in different places in the periphery of Phulaguri. The peasants of Barpujia, Roha, Kampur, Chapari and Jamunamukh area assembled in the *Raijmels* at Phulaguri for having the matter discussed there. The *Raij* raised their voice against the imposition of the income tax in the *Raij-mels* and decided to move the matter before the authority. About 1000 *ryots* as per the decision of the *Raij-mels* came over to the *Sadar* Court on the 17th September, 1861 to place their grievances before the Deputy Commissioner of the Nowgong district. The *ryots* were not allowed easy passage for their entry into the court. But some of the *ryots* entered into the Deputy Commissioner's room forcefully. Unfortunately, the Deputy Commissioner Lt. Herbert Sconce, instead of listening to their grievances, treated the matter merely as a law and order problem and passed orders to detain them in the *Thana*. However, they were released by the evening through the mediation of Dhan Sing, a wealthy person of the locality.

On October 9, some leading persons and the *Gaonburhas* of the area submitted to the Deputy Commissioner a memorandum of protest against the ceasing of poppy

cultivation and imposition of taxes on their houses, gardens and on *pan*. But the Deputy Commissioner did not budge even an inch from his stand and were convinced that they could not have a hearing from him.³⁴

Finding no ray of hope, they decided to review the tax policy of the government in the *Raij-mels* scheduled to be held on the 15th October at Phulaguri. The *Raij-Mels* was held at the market field situated on the bank of the river Kalang (Nowgong). The *Raij-mels* were to be held for five days as decisions could not be taken in one sitting. The verdict mooted out was not to pay taxes to be levied on the items.

Acting on an intelligence report, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong tried to disperse the *Raij-mels* by deputing a police party under a *Daroga* on the 14th October. The Party arrived at the site by the 15th October but failed to curb the *Mels*. Another police party was dispatched on the third day but it also met failure. However, interference from the government made the situation volatile leading to the continuation of the proceedings, consequent of which additional groups of *Melkies* coming from distant villages made the *Raij-mels* far-flung. In fact, the *Raij-mel* had the sanction of the society where final decision had been taken by the *melkies*. On the 17th October, the *Daroga* arrested some leaders to make his attempt successful, but the *Melkies* with assistance of the peasants got them released by overpowering the *Daroga*.³⁵

On direction of the Deputy Commissioner, Lieutenant Singer, the Assistant Commissioner arrived at Phulaguri on the 18th October. He found there a gathering of over three thousand, many armed with *Lathies* on the hands and *Pugris* on the heads. Lt. Singer had mistaken the *Lathies* (Sticks) as arms and ordered his police party to disperse the *mels*. He even himself was involved in seizing the *Lathies*. As a result, the situation turned violent. Eventually, Singer was beaten to death and his body was thrown into the river Kalang.³⁶

Persons involved in the killing were Bahu, Kati Lalung, Thomba Lalung, Jubo Lalung, Mohi Koch and Koli Deka. The Deputy Commissioner sent another police party under a *Havildar* on the following day. This party quelled the *Raij-mels* by using fire arms. Several peasants were killed and many others left wounded in the field. Foreseeing the possibility of holding *Raij-mels* over and again, the Deputy Commissioner accompanied by a party of Assam Light Infantry, marched into Kachuhati, Phulaguri,

Nelie and some other places. As a precautionary measure, 41 persons including the sons of the old *Lalung Raja* were arrested.³⁷ Nine persons, according to an account, were arrested. Of them, two were banished for 14 years, one was given 7 years rigorous punishment and six were sentenced to transportation for life. It is said in an account that some of the arrested persons were awarded capital punishment; they were Lakshman Singh Deka, Sambor Lalung and Rangbor Deka.³⁸

In between the Phulaguri *Raij-Mels* of 1861 and the *Raij-mels* of Patharughat, Rangia and Lachima of 1893-94, the Peasants of different places of Assam organized their *mels* in different period. For instance, we can mention the name of the *Raij-mels* of Patharughat, Bajali, Hadira and Gobindapur of 1869, and Hajo *Raij-Mels* of 1890.

After 1890, William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, raised the rate of land revenue from 70 to 80 percent in 1892 and the rates were raised, in certain cases, to 100 percent. The measure was considered to be a foul play on the part of the government. As a consequence, the people decided to take cognizance of the matter in the *Raij-mels*. *Raij-mels* were held in Rangia, Lachima (erstwhile Kamrup) and Patharughat (erstwhile Darrang). Moreover, *Mels* were held in the tahsils of Nalbari, Barama, Bajali, Pati Darrang and in the *Mouzas* of Sarukhetri and upper Barbhag.³⁹

At Balagaon, a village close to Rangia, a *Raij-mel* was held on the 24th December, 1893. The *Mel* dealt with the incidence of the enhanced land revenue on the *ryots* and decided not to pay the enhanced rate. The agitated peasants destroyed the huts of the *Hat* (village market) and looted the shops of the *Marwaris* on the pretension that their arrival was mainly responsible for the hike of revenue.⁴⁰

The no-revenue campaign of Rangia started with the looting of the Rangia *bazaar* in the morning. To discredit the *Mel*, the Colonial government linked up the *Mel* with looting. What the local sources reveal is that the *Tahsildar* of Rangia, Radhanath Barua, was an oppressor and the *ryots* were, naturally, hostile to him. Moreover, due to the outbreak of *Kalazar* disease, a major chunk of the peasants remained absent from the agricultural field for a certain period of time which had a devastating effect on agriculture compelling the peasants to take loans from the *Marwari* money-lenders. The imposition of a market toll on the cash crops irritated the peasants and ultimately, the revenue hike

added fuel to the fire. The people out of anger boycotted the *bazaar* by destroying the huts. Boycotting, indeed, was the course of action adopted in the *Raij-mels*.⁴¹

Mccabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup on receipt of the information of the proceedings of the *Raij-mels*, deputed Mr. Reilly, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, to investigate on the matter⁴². The peasants got scent of it and roughly 2500 to 3000 agitating peasants assembled at Rangia for holding demonstration on the issue. The agitating mob threatened to destroy the post office, *Thana*, *Kutcherry* and the *Tahsildars* house. But due to timely intervention of the police, the administration became able to bring the situation under control. But for a number of days, the area remained tensed. Though Reilly could arrest some demonstrators but failed to arrest the *melkies* (leaders) up to the 5th January, 1894. Mccabe proceeded to Rangia and encamped at Rangia due to the tensed situation of Rangia. Another *Raij-mel* was held for reviewing the situation on the 8th January, 1894 and this time, Mccabe succeeded in arresting some of the *melkies* involved in the 24th December riot.⁴³

The news of the arrest of the leaders was circulated to and fro. To make protest of it, *Raij-mels* were held in different parts of the districts of Kamrup and Darrang. On the 10th January, 1894, some peasants came from Betnam *Mauza* of Tamulpur to place their demands before Mccabe. Seeing this, Mccabe on the same day issued from his Rangia camp an order prohibiting the sitting of *Raij-mels*. A large mob about 2500 to 3000 people encamped in the fields close to the *Thana* towards the evening. This large gathering was consisting of the local people and the *Melkies* from different *Mauzas* under the *Tahsils* of Rangia. The *Melkies* used to come with *Lathies* in their hands. Mccabe, in order to disperse them, read out his order what the mobs declined to yield. They raised to slogan 'we won't pay the revenue at the enhanced rate'.⁴⁴

The crowd by late evening made proceedings to force the *Thana* for getting the prisoners released. When they were trying to make their attempts effective, the Deputy Commissioner then ordered instantly for firing. Finally, he succeeded to arrest and apprehend several persons from among the *Raij*. In the non-official record, more than fifty persons were killed in the firing but official records deny it and reported that the *Raij* were dispersed without blood shedding.⁴⁵

Mels were held in Nalbari and upper Borbhag *mouza* under Nalbari revenue *Tahsil* and this can be known from the report of McCabe, the then Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup. A *Raij-mel* was held, according to local source, on the 11th January, 1894 at Raj Kadamtal of Sandha Paikarkuchi village near Nalbari. The *Raij-mel* at Rajkadamtal decided to proceed to Rangia for raising protest before the Deputy Commissioner against the revenue hike on land. But the authority showed indifference to their demand. Rather, some of them were said to have been bulleted by them though it is difficult to establish due to the lack of recorded data. Rupkanta Doloi, who hailed from Guakuchi village, was the chief organizer of the *Raij-mel*. The other persons who organized the *mels* were the residents of the nearest villages who attended the *mels* in any capacity.⁴⁶

Raij-mels were held in Bajali also in protest against the revenue hike on land and therefore, decisions for non-payment of revenue were taken there. The *Raij-mels* issued command to rise against such payment and ryots willing to pay were given threatening.⁴⁷ Like Bajali, the *Raij-mels* were held in Barama *Tahsils* also with same *modus operandi* and with same spirit. The *mels* appointed their own *Dakowals* to carry orders from village to village and organized *Lathials* to oppose attachment of property.⁴⁸

From the month of December of 1893, the *Raij-mels* were being held in Sarukhetri *mauza*. The *Mels* continued even after the imposition of prohibitory order by McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup. Local version relating to Sarthebari *Raij-mels* instead of accepting Lachima as a place of riots of 21st Jan., 1894 want to establish Pana-tup in South Sarthebari as the place of *riots*. However, the riot was the culmination of a series of *Raij-mels* held in different villages within the periphery of Sarthebari.

The land of Sarthebari was not suitable for wet crops. The revenue oriented settlement policy conducted in the area was said to have been an unscientific one. The measuring process was also defective. Moreover, the people of the area considered the land revenue as a burden. The people of Sarthebari, therefore, organized *Raij-mels* against the revenue-hike and the news of the *Raij-mels* held in some other parts of the district also encouraged them for taking such drive. Decisions were taken in the *Raij-mels* for non-payment of enhanced revenue on land and resistance on its collection. Some of the *melkies* from distant villages like Chamata, Tapa were also found to have turned up in the *Raij-mels* of Sarthebari. The *melkies* of Sarthebari were Pusparam Kahar, Kanak

Kankata *Melki*, Mulung Tamuly, Japmal Patowary, Sindhumal Pathak, Ghutle Deka, Jadu Choudhury, Bhakatram Member, Bhabna Sadagar, Jina Talukdar and Janaki Talukdar. Amongst the Muslims, Babri Phakir, Bala Phakir, Dhasa Phakir, Mangta Gual, Aghona, Rajat, Powabar Mahajan, Mehbur, Nirmal Phakir, Forester Sayer Ali, Aichena Melki, Lotho Melki, Manik Fakir, Dukho Gual, Mihir Baider, Sambar etc. were present in the *Raij-mels*. About fifty leading Muslims from the nearby villages like Lachima, Barsala also attended the *Raij-mels*.

Peasants from Nasatra, Helacha, Tapabari, Amrikhowa, Byaskuchi Satra and Namsala also attended the *Raij-mels*. The *Raij-mels* held at the initiative of these leaders decided not to pay enhanced revenue.

On the other hand, the Colonial government was bent upon the realization of revenue at any cost and agents were engaged to do that. Holiram Misra, Mandal of Kapla Badesila, Hagura Gaonburha of Lachima and Dasram Choudhury, the *Mauzadar* of Sarukhetri *mauza* were trying to collect revenue by intimidation. Of them, some were excommunicated from the society as per the decision of the *Raij-mels*. But in spite of *Raij-mels*' injunction, the *Mauzadar* went to Lachima for collection of revenue. He was accompanied by Holiram Misra Mandal. Receiving the news, a group of people from Sarthebari rushed to Lachima and assaulted the *mauzadar* and the *Mandal*.⁴⁹

Sources are silent as to the date of occurrence of the incident. However, in all probability, a great *Raij-mel* was summoned on 21st Jan, 1894, for reviewing the state of affairs arising out of the assault on the government agents. The Extra Assistant Commissioner, Sub Divisional Officer (in-charge) of Barpeta, had been to Lachima and encamped there. Madhab Chandra Bordoloi, the then Extra Assistant Commissioner of Barpeta, tried to mediate for the payment of enhanced revenue. But the *Raij* was stuck to the decision of the *Raij-mel* held earlier. The Extra Assistant Commissioner might have exceeded the limit of exactions which caused excitement among the *Raij*. The Extra Assistant Commissioner was guilty of going against the interest of the *Raij* and he was to pay Rs.5.00 as fine besides apologizing for his behaviour. It is said that the *Gaonburha* of Lachima had escaped him to Barpeta.⁵⁰ Anyway, there is something wrong as to date and place of occurrence of the incident of the assault.

Somehow, Mccabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, on receipt of the news of incident rushed to the spot by evening of 24th Jan of 1894. He quickly sent a party of 15 Sepoys of the 13th Bengal Infantry and 15 armed police personnel to Lachima. By the next morning, the party arrived at the spot. Measures were adopted by the 25th January for arrest of the ring leaders and finally 59 were arrested and kept in the temporary lock-up built for the purpose.

The *Raij* were greatly ignited at this and thronged to the place to meet in a *Raij-mel* to decide the course of action. A memorandum was submitted to the Deputy Commissioner signed by 6000 men refusing to pay increased revenue and demanding instant release of the arrested leaders. But the Deputy Commissioner insisted on the government's demand and cautioned the *Raij* against non-payment of revenue and served even *Bakijai* notice on it. Mccabe ordered a bayonet charge on the *Raij* and dispersed them finally. For the suppression of the *Raijmel*, a section of his police party was dispatched to Barama and Bajali.⁵¹

A reign of terror was let loose in Sarthebari area. Some of the *Melkies* were arrested and some of them were subjected to inhumane torture, viz. putting yoke on the neck to plough in the field of Bainakuchi. Nanda Deka, a man of Sarthebari was dragged to the field for inflicting such torture. Some *Melkies* went underground in the jungle for evading arrest. In spite of this reign of terror, *Mels* were held secretly at night several times for keeping the morale of the people unbroken. Anyway, some of the leaders were fined and others were sentenced to imprisonment. Of the fined group, Atmaram and Chanaram *melkies* were from the village Amrikhowa and of the imprisonment group, Pusparam Kahar, Babri Fakir, Jogen Chaudhury, Japmal Patowary, and Mulung Kohar were the inhabitants of the village Sarthebari. Some of the *melkies* of the neighbouring villages, viz. Byaskuchi, Amrikhowa, Barkapla, Belbari, Helecha, and Bamakhata were also sentenced to imprisonment.⁵²

Like the North, *Raij Mel* were held in different parts of South Kamrup also in the month of December, 1893 against the enhanced rate of revenue on land which was a matter of great concern to the *ryots*. The *ryots* of different *Tahsils* organized *Raij-mels* and decided for non-payment of enhanced revenue. Mccabe, the Deputy Commissioner

of Kamrup, had been to the *Tahsils* of south Kamrup in order to tackle the situation and induced the *ryots* to accept the increased assessment.⁵³

When *Raij-mels* were held against the enhancement of land revenue, the attempts of the government also went on for its suppression. Police and military were kept on alert so that they could be dispatched at any moment for the suppression of the *Raij-mels*. The *Raij-mels*, as a matter of fact, were escalating in various parts of Pati Darang.

Some Bijoy Choudhury paid Rs.25 as land revenue defying the injunction of the *Raij-mels* which made the situation of Pati Darrang tense. So, a *Raij-mel* was held at Nowgong, Pati Darang to review the situation arising out of the payment of revenue made by Bijoy Chaudhury on the 12th December, 1893. Finally, the *Raij-mel* fined him Rs.25. Fined amount was equal to the amount he paid as revenue on land.⁵⁴ A *Raij-mel* was held again in Nowgong, Pati Darang on the 9th January, 1894 where the *Raij* made vow not to give evidence in favour of Bijoy Choudhury. It is said that Choudhury had filed a case in the Court against the intimidation by the *Raij-mel*. As a result, McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner, sentenced three leading men by one month's rigorous imprisonment. A *Raij-mel* was held at Tengabari, Pati Darang on the 4th Jan, 1894 and decided not to pay revenue. In the *Mels*, the *Raij* determined to take a revenge on them who attempted to attach property of the defaulters.⁵⁵

Revenue hike on land in 1892 caused severe resentment in some of the villages of Darrang district. As per the new settlement of land, assessments were augmented in 1892. Land revenues of the district, according to an official record, were augmented from Rs.4, 96,682 to Rs.6, 48,820 for the financial years of 1892-93 and 1893-94.⁵⁶

As the peasants of the district were not financially viable, increased assessment became their burden. They, being immensely dissatisfied, organized *Raij-mels* like the *ryots* of Kamrup. Therefore, *Raij-mels* were organized in Kalaigaon, Sipajhar and Mangaldoi *Tahsils*. The *Raij-mels* decided for non-payment of augmented rate of land revenue. The peasants, in order to express unity and solidarity, thronged to the *Raij-mel* held at Sipajhar and the decision of Sipajhar *Raij-mel* had been forwarded to the *Tahsils* of Mangaldoi and Kalaigaon. Mr. Ramson, the SDO of Mangaldoi, out of fear informed the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang about the course of development of the *Raij-Mel* and sought measure from going the situation out of control.

Durgaram Choudhury of Sanekuchi village of Nalbari was a *Lakhirajdar* and possessed about 400 bighas *Nipsikhiraj* (half revenue paying land) land in Dihina village under Hajo Police Station of Kamrup. The peasants of the village were the *ryots* of Durgaram Choudhury. But they were not safe under him because they had to give him a major portion of their produce. He, very often, used to collect his share forcefully. He became powerful for having the support of the local administration. However, the *ryots* resorted to a secret *Raij-mel* finding no alternative solutions to the problems. According to the decision secretly taken at the *Raij-mel* of Dihina, Durgaram Choudhury was killed when he went to his Zamindari in Dihina on the back of his elephant. Finally, the killers were put to trial in the Court and were awarded life punishment to Kania Das and Lakshmi Goswami. Mitha Das and Ojan Das, two others were also sentenced for two years rigorous imprisonment.⁵⁷

The peasants of the Patharughat *Tahsil* of Darrang district declined to pay the enhanced rate of revenue in accordance of the decision of the *Raij-mel* held in the month of January 26, 1894. The *Tahsildar* might have reported it to the administration on the same day to Mr. Ramson, the Sub Divisional Officer of Mangaldoi. On receipt of the telegram from Mr. Ramson, the Sub Divisional Officer of Mangaldoi, Mr. Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang decided to take coercive action and left Tezpur for Patharughat (26th January) being equipped with a body of sepoy, civil police and constables under Mr. Barrington, the Superintendent of Police of Darrang. The *ryots* of Patharughat somehow got scent of it and assembled in a *Raij-mel* on the 28th January, 1894 with a view to placing their demands before the district authorities. The *ryots* collectively put forward their decisions to the *Tahsil*. They, as a matter of fact, were demanding for the remission of the enhanced rate of land revenue to the rate of the former settlement. Decisions of the *Raij-mels* were circulated throughout the area. In the meantime, J.D. Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner and his party arrived at Patharughat and had spent the night there in the rest house. The Superintendent of police was engaged to restrain property of the defaulter *ryots*. Barrington, the Superintendent of Police with a Police Party and in company of Bhabani Charan Bhattacharyya, the *Tahsildar* of Patharughat *Tahsil* went to attach the property of a defaulter-*ryot*. Knowing this, a group

of about 200 peasants came forward to resist it. The peasants advanced to the house where process of attaching property was being started.

The Superintendent of Police, having seen it, had left off his party with the *Havildar* to attach the property and he himself along with the rest marched to halt the incoming of the *ryots*. The peasants were halted at the point of revolver. The Superintendent of Police then made the process of identification of the leading men of the peasants group with the help of the concerned *Tahsildar* and *mandals*. Of the crowd of peasants, 13 men were identified by the *Tahsildar*. The Superintendent of Police ordered four of them to accompany him and the property of the defaulter *ryots* was ultimately attached.⁵⁸

The peasants from different localities were in accordance of the decisions of the earlier *Raij-mels*, coming to participate in the *Raij-mels* of Patharughat on the 28th January, 1894. According to Dolipurana, the leading leaders were Thetraberia Chaul Bepari, Biyahperia Ganak, Baraberia Jugi, Pradip Patgiri, Baneikuchia Mena, Kaljeria Gorla, Tarageya Gorla, Sishuram, Amchakaliarama, Narahari Moktar, Bhathirai Gaonburha, Toporam, Dutiram, Buduka, Kamala Mahajan, Umamandal, Patidangia Athia, Ram Chandra Patgiri, Joydhan, Olalhari, Lojoram Gaonburha, Sarumani, Bishnuram Saloi, Kaliram, Rangmena, Ranjit Saloi, Bodharu Koch, Dhaniram, Barlikira, Mihiram etc. Hindu-Koch-Kalita, Hira, Brahmin, Ganak, Suri and Muslims turned up to the *Raij-mels*. By the time, about 2000 peasants were present in the *Raij-Mels* to press for the reduction of the enhancement of revenue on land. The Deputy Commissioner was said to have informed the peasants that the re-assessment rates would remain unchanged except of the rates of *faringati* lands reduced by 10 and 9 *annas* respectively on three classes of *faringoti* lands.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, more peasants and *ryots* were turning up to the field while their demands were turned-down by the Deputy Commissioner. The Deputy Commissioner then ordered them to disperse which was defied by them. The situation became such that Barrington, the Superintendent of Police of Darrang, had ordered his force to disperse the crowd by force and finally ordered to fix bayonets. But the crowd pressed forward and some of them had even thrown clods of earth and split bamboos. Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, then ordered firing. The mob had to retreat when some of

them lay dead and injured. Altogether 15 persons, according to the official record, were killed on the spot and 37 were injured. According to late Dineswar Sharma, 140 peasants were killed and 150 injured in the fields of Patharughat.⁶⁰

The dead are treated as martyrs of the nation as they fought for the cause of the peasants of the country. Peasants from Byaspara, Muslimghopa, Dahi, Barkaliajar, Alikahapara, Ghopa, Sarabari, Barampur, Sibikuchi, and Pati Darang sacrificed their lives for the country.

V

The *Raij-mels* had played a significant role in mobilizing peasants exclusively against the agrarian policy and the agrarian exploitation conducted by the Imperialist ruler, the feudal land holders, money-lenders, the traders and other classes of vested interest. It helped in the growth of consciousness among the masses in the 19th century. According to S.D. Goswami, the main strength and guiding force of the peasant uprisings of Assam from 1861 to 1894 was the *Raij-mels* which spearheaded the resistance struggle against the repressive and exploitative action of the dominant Colonial class and the power.⁶¹

The *Raij-mels* gave the peasants courage and strength and the *Mels* were the leading and guiding force of the peasant uprising of Assam. Actually, the *Raij-mels* were the peasant mobilization campaign which mobilized peasants against the Colonial government. The peasants took active part in the *Raij-mels* hoping that the *Mels* would lead them towards right direction giving them respite from the exploitation and burden of revenue. Despite their failure, the *Raij-mels* compelled the Colonial government to concede to the partial reduction of the rates of assessment.⁶²

Thus, the *Raij-mels* fulfilled the expectations of the peasants. Moreover, by encouraging brotherhood and fraternity among the peasantry, the *Raij-mels* took Herculean step in uniting them against the Colonial apparatus. In brief, the *Raij-mels* played a significant role in mobilizing and bringing out the masses into the path of socio-economic and political agitation leading to the final growth of political consciousness in Colonial Assam.

In a democracy like India where there is no place for a referendum, people may follow this age-old device of the *Raij-mels* for reviewing the situation arising out of the

selfish spirit of the political parties, national or regional, in 'keeping alive democratic ideals for the greater interest of the nation.'⁶³

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