



The Revolt of 1857 in Assam with Special Reference to Ballads

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ABSTRACT : *The revolt of 1857 is a landmark in the history of India which brought the end of the rule of British East India Company and the beginning of the rule of British Crown in India. The Revolt was initiated by the sepoys of Meerut against the British; later on the joining of civilian in the revolt gave it a new dimension. Assam was also touched by the spark of the revolt of 1857. In Assam revolt was started by the middle class of Assam. The official records states that the revolt was not spread much in Assam but the oral sources revealed another side of the revolt which clearly shown the spread of the revolt in Assam and its impact on common masses of Assam. By this article an attempt has been made to reconstruct the revolt of 1857 in Assam and also find some new aspects of the nature of the revolt in Assam which distinguished the revolt from other parts of India.*

Keywords: *Assam, Assamese Bellads Revolt1857, British, Maniram Dewan.*

I. Introduction:

The Revolt of 1857 is an important event in the history of India. It began on 10th may 1857 in Meerut with the mutiny of Indian soldiers or sepoys as the British used to call them. The unrest against the British rule that had been brewing for a long time now broke out into a revolt. The 'mutiny of soldiers' soon spread like wild fire to large part of the country. The revolt was caused by wide spread discontent that the British policies in India had created. The policy of conquest pursued by the British had created unrest among many Indian rulers and chiefs. British had entered into agreements with them under a system of subsidiary alliance. Sind, Punjab and Awadh were annexed by this policy. The vigorous application of the doctrine of lapse by Dalhousie added to the discontent which the annexations had already caused.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The proposed study primarily deals with the various dimensions of the revolt of 1857 in Assam. The main objectives of the study are:

- 1) To study the spread of the Revolt among the various classes of the society and to study the nature of the revolt in Assam.
- 2) To reconstruct the existing knowledge regarding the Revolt through ballads.



III. Methodology:

The article involves a critical use of both primary and secondary sources, based on internal and external criticism. It is based on historical and oral sources. The paper is basically written with the help of various secondary sources like books, journals, newspapers etc.

IV. Result and Discussion :

a) Revolt of 1857 in Assam

The Revolt of 1857 is an important event in the history of India. It began on 10th may 1857 in Meerut with the mutiny of Indian soldiers or sepoy as the British used to call them. The unrest against the British rule that had been brewing for a long time now broke out into a revolt. The 'mutiny of soldiers' soon spread like wild fire to large parts of the country. The revolt was caused by wide spread discontent that the British policies in India had created. The policy of conquest pursued by the British had created unrest among many Indian rulers and chiefs. British had entered into agreements with them under a system of subsidiary alliance. Sind, Punjab and Awadh were annexed by this policy. The vigorous application of the doctrine of lapse by Dalhousie added to the discontent which the annexations had already caused.

The British also followed the policy of destroying the power of the nobles and zamindars in the territories they had annexed. Many of them were deprived of their lands. Under the new land revenue system introduced by the British, the old land owning families were displaced. Besides the British policies and attitude had created a fear among the people that the British government was determined to destroy their religion and culture that convert them to Christianity.

The rising discontent in the Country was bound to influence the Indian soldiers who formed almost eighty five percent of the British Government's troops in India. They felt the injustice which the old ruling families in India had been suffering. Besides, the Indian soldiers had their own specific revenges because of which they became the pioneers of the revolt. At this time a new type of rifle was introduced. Its cartridges were smeared with cows and pigs fats at grease, and the paper covering them had to be bitten off before they could be loaded into the rifle. The use of these grease cartridges offended the religious of both Hindu and Muslim soldiers and it became the immediate cause of the Revolt.

The mutiny of the soldiers at Meerut had been sparked off on ninth May 1857, when eighty five Indian soldiers were convicted and sentenced to long periods of imprisonment for their refusal to accept the grease cartridges. The areas where uprising was most widespread were Delhi, Awadh, Rohilakhand, Bundelkhand, the areas around Allahabad, Agra and Meerut. In these regions large masses of civilian population participated in the revolt and battles were fought against the British. In Assam the revolt was organised by Maniram Dewan with the help of Piyali Baruah and Kandeswar Singha, the deprived king of Ahom dynasty of Assam.



Sekhar Bandhopadhyay had mentioned that the year 1857 witnessed armed revolts in parts of central and Northern India, as a result of which affective British rule merely collapsed this region until the spring of 1858, when order was restored again by the advancing imperial forces[1]. Though Bandhapadhyay mentioned that the revolt was mainly confined in Central India but this part of the Revolt touched the north east India also. Sir Edward Gait also stated that the great sepoy mutiny of 1857 left Assam almost untouched. The situation was at time by no means free from danger, and comparative immunity which this part of India enjoyed was the very largely to be watchfulness and resource displayed by the civil military officers on the spot [2]. Subir Kar in his book 1857 North East : A reconstruction from folk and oral sources mentioned R.C Majumdar statement regarding the revolt of 34th native infantry regiment that it was a “spordaic outburst and the view of the historians that “they found no sympathy among the people are reproduction of the contemporary accounts of the British officials and the historians. As said by Subir Kar though the official source does not state much about the revolt of 1857 in Assam but the folklore and other oral sources revealed another side of the Revolt of 1857. The memories of the revolt are still alive in the minds of the people through the folk songs and stories most of which are passing to one generation to another by songs and stories. The oral sources are not only the evidence of the spread of the revolt of Assam but also revealed the popularity of the revolt in Assam.

b) Background of the revolt in Assam:

In the nineteenth century Assam entered into a new political and socio-economic phase with the beginning of British rule in Assam. The third decade of the nineteenth century brought political changes along with the treaty of Yandboo which was signed on twenty fourth February 1826 by general sir Archibald Campbell on British side and the governor of Ligaing Maha Ming Hla Hatin from the Burmese side. According to the clause of the treaty of the Yandboo the Burmese renounced its claim over Assam. The withdrawal of the Burmese provided the British with the opportunity to create spear of influence in the region [3]. Thus the treaty of Yandboo marked the beginning of the new era in the history of Assam which brought socio-political changes in this region.

British regime was welcomed by the common people of Assam as well as the noble of the Ahom Monarchy because the common people considered the Britishers as their saviour and the noble of the Ahom monarchy thought the coming of the British regime as temporary as they were totally unaware of the colonial mindset of the British. The interest of the ruling classes of Assam greatly affected by the British colonial policies as mentioned by S.L Baruah , its new administrative measures introduced by the British gave a serious blow to the old aristocracy. The abolition of the slavery in 1843 made the situation worse and pushed its members down to the level of ordinary rayats [4].



The old aristocracy could not cope up with the new administrative system introduced by the British. They not only lost their privileges but also lost the chances to work in the new administrative structure because the new government preferred the man of ability who were mostly the Bengali people. In this situation the old aristocracy strongly felt that they could get back their privileges only after restoring the Ahom monarchy. Moreover 500 Assamese ex-servicemen who were unemployed after king purander singh had been dethroned [5].

The policies of the new government affected the common people also. The administrative machinery introduced by the East India Company did not satisfy the subjects and nobles alike[6]. Like the aristocratic class the mass had also lost their faith in the British Government as they believe that the British saved them from the Burmese but in course of time they came to know the real motive of their so called saviours. As mentioned by S.L Baruah, concerned only with collection of taxes, a new government was totally indifferent in improving the economy of the miserable rayats[7]. Benudhar Sarma also stated that lands were reassessed. Provision was made for the realization of tolls from the users of the ghats and bazars. He further stated that British came to Assam only to deliver her people from the clutches of the Burmese, they fastened the Assamese slowly but surely to their own yoke; an artful fellow indeed a devil in a doublet. As a colonial power it was obvious that the British were trying to fulfill their economic interest by every means. Francis Jenkins in 1853 admitted that the economic conditions for the Assamese people already suffered very much due to prolonged strife coupled with the invasion of the Burmese and their atrocities[9]. The British regime gave more importance to the collection of taxes from the masses but the economic interest of the people were ignored by the British government which brought dissatisfaction among the common masses which later contributed as one of the causes of revolt of 1857 in Assam.

With the coming of the British the people of Assam came into direct contact with the neighboring states especially with Bengal which brought many socio-economic changes in the society of Assam. It is a significant landmark in the Assamese society Assam remain aloof from the other parts of India. But the Colonial power brought Assam closer to other parts of India which helped Assamese people to know about the development of other places of India. The people of Assam closely followed the development of education, culture and literature of Bengal. Infact Maniram Dewan, Kashinath Tamuliphukan, Joduram Deka Baruah and some other wrote articles in Bengali paper like Samachar darpan, Samachar chandraka published from Kolkata[10].

c) Maniram Dewan and the Revolt of 1857

Maniram was a man of ability having vast knowledge of social political knowledge of that period and also proved himself loyal to the British Empire by giving all the informations regarding the socio-economic and political conditions of the state. In 1828 Neufulle appointed him as Sirasatadar. Though Maniram at first appreciated the British rule in Assam but later he



realized his fault when he was not given enough opportunity to extend his tea gardens at chinamara and chenglung. He was not allowed waste land at concessional rates like the European planters. In 1858 A.J Muffet Mills, the Judge of the Sadar Diwani Adalat came to visit Assam to get more information regarding the local states of administration. Kandeswar Singha submitted a memorandum claiming his rights to hold Assam on a tributary basis under the Company rule but Mill rejected this claim [11]. This report compelled Maniram to get rid of the foreign government and thereafter he went to kolkata. In kolkata he came in contact with many intellectuals and came to know the uprising of the sepoys in other parts of India and thereby planned to organise revolts in Assam against the British. Maniram suggested Kandeswar Singha to take the help of the local sepoys stationed at Sibsagar and Dibrugarh to fulfill their purpose.

d) Piyali Baruah and Revolt of 1857

Maniram and Piyali Baruah must be counted as two of the brightest luminaries whose name posterity must remember with reverent care[12]. The role of Piyali Baruah in the revolt of 1857 was decisive. Unlike Maniram from the very beginning Piyali did not support the British regime. The Chief planner of the revolt was Maniram Dewan but it was piyali who brought the plan to action. Infact Maniram cannot be termed as perfect organizer because he never appeared before the people with his plans and actions. Amulya Chandra Sarma had stated that the sociability of piyali Baruah made him popular among all sections of the people. The other important organizers of the Revolt were bahadur gaon Burha, formud Ali, Madhumalik, Dutiram Baruah. The revolt was planned to be organised during the Durga Puja but an incident took place which led to opening up of the whole plan before the British government and also changed the scenario of the Revolt in Assam. As a result of which the leaders were arrested one by one which destroyed the whole planning of the revolt in Assam.

e) Act of XIV of 1857:

All the accused were tried under the Act no XIV of 1857, which was adopted by the legislative council on 6th June 1857. Piyali was tried on 9th of February was Maniram was tried on 23rd of February 1858 and both were publically hanged on 26th February 1858. Kandeswar Singha was send as a prisoner from Jorhat to Alipore Gaol on 9th September 1857.

The trial of the accused of the revolt of 1857 in Assam was mere a formality because Horloid who was the judge of the trial had a preconceived determination to hang Maniram and Piyali. As Amulya Sarma mentioned that those who were presenting the trial heard him declaring 'hanging first trial afterwards'[13]. Benudhar Sarma had also stated that it was the sentence which commissioner Horloid asked magistrate Harloid to execute the same person in two different gaols. According to Barpujari when this highhandedness and irregular



proceedings reached the government of Bengal the special commission given to Horloid was withdrawn.

f) Nature of the Revolt of 1857 in Assam

In Assam though revolt was started by the rising middle class to protect their interest by restoring Kandeswar Singha to the Ahom throne, but they got the support from the military and common people who were also dissatisfied with the new system. Sekhar Bandhopadhaya mentioned that those who revolted had two elements among them- the feudal elements and big landlords on one end and the peasantry on the other. In Assam also the revolt has feudal elements[14].The aristocratic class revolted when they lost their privileges while the peasantry had also revolted because of the increased tax. In other parts of India the Revolt was started by the sepoys and was followed by the civilian. Bipan Chandra has mentioned that except in Muzzafar Nagar and Saharanpur civil rebellion followed the revolt of the sepoys, which was sometimes organised self -seeking local leaders and sometimes was only mob-violence caused by the breakdown of administrative machinery. But in Assam the revolt of sepoy followed the civil rebellion[15].

Another aspect of the revolt is that the people who were getting benefits from the new government show their loyalty to their masters only. There were some other officials who helped Maniram Dewan to execute his planning's by financial help or by giving beneficial advice. As mentioned by benudhar Sarma Collector Mahesh Chandra Baruah, Balarm Phukan, Deobar Sadar Amin and good many nobilities of the day assisted the Dewan by giving wise counsels [16].The leaders of the revolt of 1857 of Assam had vision to outset British and to restore Ahom Monarchy. Though Maniram was inspired by the revolt which was outburst in the outside of Assam but he did not associate with the other leaders, they fought in local levels.

V.D. Savarkar mentioned the revolt of 1857 as the first war of independence but Assam witnessed its first anti-British in the year 1828-1830. Those revolts were also dominated by British and the revoltees were given capital punishment. Nuville was the judge who gave capital punishment to Piyali Phukan and Jeuram Duliah on the advice of local Panchayat judge like Maniram Dewan, Madaram Borgohain, Radhanath Barbaruah and Kashinath Tamuli.

Thus we can see that revolt of 1857 has some peculiar characteristics which made it different from the other parts of India by the basic nature of the revolt that id Anti-British is common as the rest of India. The revolt failed due to many causes like lack of proper leadership, absence of unity among the various classes of Assam, negative attitude of the intellectuals towards the revolt etc.



g) Reconstructing of the revolt of 1857 with the help of Assamese Ballads :

There are some folk songs which narrate the different aspects of the Revolt of 1857. These folk songs have the characteristic of the ballad of English literature which are known as 'malita' in Assamese literature. This malita specially deals with the historical events of the region. Maheswar Neog in his book "Assomiya Sahityor Rup Rekha" described Maniram Dewan as Kalita Raja and said that the personality of Maniram Dewan in Assamese society is like a way which had ended as serf. [17] . Dr. Hemakanta Kumar Sarma also said that the mailta written on the memories of Maniram Dewan reflect the sympathy of common people to Maniram Dewan [18] .One malita mentions-

Sohnor dhowa khowat	khali oi maniram	সোনৰ ধোৱাখোৱাত	খালি ঐ মনিৰাম
Roopar dhowa khowat	khali	ৰূপৰ ধোৱাখোৱাত	খালি
Kinu rojaghara	gharat doroh asorili	কিনো ৰজাঘৰত	দোৰোহ আচৰিলি
Digit sipjori loli		ডিঙিত চিপজৰী ল'লি	[19]

Jogen Setia in his article "Buranji Adharita Loksahitya: Malita" stated that in some Bellad Maniram Dewan is also torned by the common people because of his intimacy with the British to fulfill his own interest. There are some malita which support his statement.

Dhanoloi korili	mon oi maniram	ধনলৈ কৰিলি	মন ঐ মনিৰাম
Dhanoloi korili	mon,	ধনলৈ কৰিলি	মন
Ahoki purushok	narakat pelali	অহকি পুৰষক	নৰকত পেলালি
Jivoro marili	kon	জীৱৰো মাৰিলি	কণ [20]

The above mentioned malita showed Maniram as a greedy person who literally destroyed his own life along with the life of his ancestors.

Eyato maniram	hiyato maniram	ইয়াতো মনিৰাম	সিয়াতো মনিৰাম
Maniram e	ki kaam kore	মনিৰামে	কি কাম কৰে,
Firigi bongalok	bheti sadhi sadhi	ফিৰিঙি বঙালক	ভেটী সাধি সাধি
rajati hobole	pange	ৰজাটি হ'বলৈ	পাঙে [21]

According to the above malita, Maniram wanted to establish his control in all the sectors for which he was accused of bribing the government officers.

sa ora nao loi	lalebondi diboloi	ছ অঁৰানাও লৈ	লালেবন্দী দিবলৈ
maniram	bhatiai gol	মনিৰাম	ভটিয়াই গ'ল,



pasote thakile Piyali Baruah
sakuri paikor khel

পাছতে থাকিল পিয়লী বৰ ৰা
ছকুৰি পাইকৰ খেল | [22]

From the above malita the support received by Piyoli Baruah from common masses was well depicted. The Assamese society of that period was formed by the common mass which were also called as paiks. Every adult male between the age 16 to 50 was registered as a paik for state service.(S. L. Baruah)

Maniram ok marili bhaloke korili
Piyalik marili kiyo
heitu kotha huni rongpur amolar
akashe uri gol jiv

মনিৰামক মাৰিলি ভালকে কৰিলি
পিয়ালীক মাৰিলি কিয়
সেইটো কথা শুনি ৰংপুৰ আমোলাৰ
আকাশে উৰি গল জীৱ | [23]

This ballad indicates that the common masses placed Piyali Baruah above Maniram Dewan, which also reveals the fact that they were more close to Piyali Baruah than Maniram Dewan.

meeting meeting kora sharat ot hunilu
kinu amonglia kotha
Maniram Dewan e moidam khonale
kaknu batora koba

মিটিং মিটিং কৰা শৰতত শুনিলো
কিনো অমংগলীয়া কথা
মনিৰাম দেৱানে মৈদাম খন্দালে
কাকনো বতৰা কবা | [24]

From the above lines it was pointed out that Maniram Dewan organized meeting which were not fruitful for the common people. On the contrary it brought some untold miseries for the common mass.

Da panit babore nao mur deuta
Kakoliyat babore nao
Maniram khosonit khajona borhale
Raije dile hao

দ পানীত বাবৰে নাও মোৰ দেউতা
কাকোলিয়াত বাবৰে নাও
মনিৰামৰ খোচনিত খাজনা বাঢ়িলে
ৰাইজে দিলে শাওঁ | [25]

From the above line it is clear that Maniram is held responsible for sudden rise in taxes, because people considered him as puppet of British Government. Benudhar Sarma has mentioned that Maniram addressing himself to vast multitude of men who had gathered there, bade them adieu in these word: “o my countryman! you had to suffer and grieve a lot from me during my tenure of office. it heaves you ,now, to foegive me ,at this juncture, foe all those omissions and commissions on my part.”(Benudhar Sarma)

Kenekoi dharile tukei oi maniram

কেনেকৈ ধৰিলে তোক এ ঐ মনিৰাম



Kenekoi dharile tuk
Eipine jorhaat hipine golaghat
Sithi likhi dharile tuk
Gupute gupute dharile maniram
Gupute gupute nile
Holroyd sahabe tokolai parote
Gupute fasi dile.

কেনেকৈ ধৰিলে তোক
এইফালে যোৰহাট সেইফালে গোলাঘাট
চিঠি লিখি ধৰিলে তোক
গুপতে গুপতে ধৰিলে মনিৰাম
গুপতে গুপতে নিলে
হলয়ড চাহাবে টোকোলাই পাৰতে
গুপতে ফাচি দিলে। [26]

According to the above lines Maniram Dewan was secretly caught and hanged by Horloid Saheb. Although it was a known fact that Maniram was hanged publicly, but the above Malita showed a different picture which revealed the high handed and irregular proceedings of judge.

Bhir khai bogori lagil oi maniram
Bhir khai bogori lagil
Maniram Dewan moribore pora
Taxi khajona barhil.

ভিৰ খাই বগৰী লাগিল ঐ মনিৰাম
ভিৰ খাই বগৰী লাগিল
মনিৰাম দেৱান মৰিবৰে পৰা
টেক্সি খাজনা বাঢ়িল। [27]

This ballad shows that the density of production was increased with the death of Maniram Dewan which also gave rise to increase in tax during that time. As a result, Assam witnessed many agrarian revolts during the period between 1860-1900.

There is a poem written by Anand Ram Das depicted a different story of Maniram Dewan during the independence struggle of Assam Maniram Dewan was considered as an inspiration for the common masses.

O maniram o khudiram
O kushal or dal
Rakhibo lagibo maan aii bharotir
Ronoloi ulabor hol

অ মনিৰাম অ খুদিৰাম
অ কুশলৰ দল
ৰাখিব লাগিব মান এই ভাৰতীৰ
ৰণলৈ ওলাবৰ হল। [28]

V.Conclusion :

In conclusion it can be said that the oral sources shown the involvement of common mass in the revolt of 1857 in Assam, while the official sources denied the spread of the revolt in Assam. Memory of the revolt of 1857 is still alive as a hero and inspiration among the people though folklores. But it is not enough to recall these heroes of 1857; some other effective steps should be taken to make popular these heroes in present time so that people of Assam can understand the spirit of nationalism of the colonial period. The revolt ended with failure but its impact is noteworthy which gives the revolt a special place in the history of colonial Assam.



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