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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE NATURE OF ASSAM'S REVOLTS OF 1893-94 AND THEIR EFFECTS BEYOND: A REVIEW ON SOME TREADED ASPECTS

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Abstract

By nature, the revolts of 1893-94 were the peasants and state direct confrontation and they were an open rebellion against the government. Basically, the revolts of 1893-94 were secular in nature as all sections united against the government. Finally, the revolts met with failure in 1894 and after that, there was no outburst of peasants in Assam. But the revolts though they failed, they increased consciousness and awareness in Assam and provided the main strength to the freedom struggle in Assam in further years. This article is an honest attempt through which some aspects beginning from the nature to the effects are addressed in a researching way.

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Introduction:-

As we observe the nature and character of various peasant revolts, then we find that almost all the revolts from below, leadership is ostensibly provided by elite elements. The uprising of Maharashtra in 1879 was led by Vasudeo Balvant Phadke, an English educated; the Deccan riots of 1875 was led by better off sections of the peasantry and in Maharashtra, the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha took the dominant role encouraging peasants to resist payment of revenue from 1896 to 1900. In the famous Indigo revolt of 1859, the leadership came from the *zamindari*-based intellectuals, Calcutta educated mukhtars or attorneys and journalists. In Champaran in 1917, school teachers and members of urban intelligentsia also provided leadership. In Kheda and Bordoli of Gujarat, the leadership came from the upper castes patidars and *brahmins*. In the Tebhaga movement of Bengal, initiative was taken by the upper caste leadership of the Communist Party and *kisan sabha*. The peasant movement of Mewar and Durbhanga were also led by the men of same categories. The no-revenue movements between 1885 and 1905 were characterized by the leadership of local notables. The no revenue movements in Assam were led by the rural elite in 1893-94

There were two sets of leaders in Assam in 1893-94: one traditional and the other, new elite. As the Assamese middle class began to emerge as the most dominant class in the society, it not only changed the leadership of the peasant revolts but also brought a change in the nature of the revolts. The peasants, finally, lost its own leadership and accepted the leadership and ideas of the most dominant class.

The non-cultivating classes like the *brahmins*, *gosains*, *mahantas* and *dolois* apparently took the initiative and a leading role in the revolts of 1893-94. But it was the poor peasantry and other sections of the rural poor including artisans who gave it a militant character. For example, Pusparam Kahar, a plebian bell-metal artisan of Sarukshetri, is still remembered in the folk memory of Kamrup for his role in the revolt of Lachima of 1893-94. R.B.McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup reported that in addition to the *dolois*, *gosains*, *mahantas* and principal landholders; others who gave leadership were the dismissed head constables and released convicts. The other example of

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emergence of leadership from below is that of Birsa Munda, the son of a share-cropper of erstwhile Bengal presidency.

Basically, the insurrections of 1893-94 were secular in nature as all sections irrespective to castes and creeds, rich and poor high and low united and fought against the colonial government.

The revolts of 1893-94, by nature, were not freedom movement. They were no-rent campaigns, organized with the object of compelling the government to yield to the will of the people by the withdrawal of unpopular measures of taxation. Compared to the Phulaguri upheaval of 1861, the no-rent agitations of 1893-94 were more organized and disciplined, though they failed. Regarding the outbreaks, it can be said that, they were not sudden and sporadic outbursts at all. The revolts of 1893-94 were mass revolts as all sections cultivating and non-cultivating, peasantry and non-peasantry took part in that. Despite having social and economic disparity and variations among the peasantry, all peasants rich and poor fought jointly against the government. Non-peasantry classes, like the *dolois*, *gosains*, *mahantas*, *brahmins*, artisans, local planters, local traders also hard-pressed by the measures of the government. Abolition of posts and privileges, plantation and waste-land policy of the government, migration and industrial policy and various kinds of taxes made them vexed and ultimately, the revolts assumed mass character by their participation. Flexibility in Assamese society also contributed lot to unite them together. De-sanskritization also helped lot to assume the revolts a mass character, as many higher castes gave up their *sanskritic* culture in order to have interaction with the lower castes. Thus, all joined hands together to show mobility and solidarity for establishing their own rights.

It remains expressed that the leaders of different Associations and *rayat sabhas* of the Brahmaputra valley took part in the sessions of Indian National Congress from 1886 to 1892. But when their participation bore no fruits, then they also stretched-out their helping hands to the peasants boycotting the sessions of Indian National Congress in 1893 and 1894.

By nature, the revolts of 1893-94 were the peasants and state direct conflict. The absence of intermediaries between the state and the peasantry was mainly responsible for the peasants and state direct confrontation. The fury of the ryots was directed against the money-lenders in the Deccan; against the Indigo-planters in Bengal in 1860; against the *zamindars* in Pubna in 1872; but in Assam, they were an open rebellion against the government in 1893-94.

After 1893-94, there was no outburst of peasants in Assam. But that does not mean that they reconciled to the British rule. As a result of 1893-94's revolts, consciousness and awareness increased in Assam. In fact, they provided the main strength to the freedom struggle in Assam in further days. The martyrdom of the peasants of Patharughat, Rangia and Lachima is the bench-mark in the history of struggle for freedom of India.

As a result of increased taxation, peasants abandoned cultivation leading to the stagnation in agriculture. Due to the involvement of the peasants in the *Raij-mels* and their flying to the neighboring villages due to the increasing pressure of revenue, production of goods began to decrease resulting famine like situation in Assam.

The cleft between the ruler and the ruled widened after 1893-94. Suspicion, enmity and racial bitterness developed between them. The number of colonial forces was increased to strengthen the British control over the province so that further revolts could be averted as well as evaded in Assam.

The *raij-mels* were suppressed ruthlessly which caused great indignation through-out the province. Finally, the Government of India had to concede to the partial reduction of the rates of assessment. At last, the government realized the folly of using force on an unwilling people and communicated its decision of further diminishing the rates of revenue to 32.7% and also limiting the increase on an individual holding to about 50% on the previous rental. The reduction of the land revenue, ultimately, by the British Government speaks for itself the success of the peasants' revolts, and it contributed enough groundwork to the national movement of India in later period.

The peasants' movement did not remain confined to the rural areas alone; gradually, the urban elite also began to make a united front with the proprietary peasants on all common issues against the rulers.

As a result of the outbreaks of 1893-94, the twinkling sounds of the bell metal industry of Sarukshetri *mauza* was silenced. Annual Sarthebari *sabha* was closed down for three years as a mark of homage to the martyrs who fought

for noble cause. Many became martyrs, many injured and many lost their properties as a result of the outbreaks of Kamrup and Darrang.

The revolts of 1893-94 failed but they inspired the people of other places to revolt against exploitation in future. They also made an impact on the contemporary Assamese society.

The prices of goods in Assam in the 19th century were cheaper. But due to the augmentation of the government revenue on the *hats*, that also began to increase. The villagers, when they instead of bringing their produced goods for selling at *hats*, began to exchange that at their villages, it brought bad effects upon the government's *hats*. Many *hats* collapsed as a result of this.

The no-rent campaigns of 1893-94 were no more successful than other resistance movements of its kind, if far reaching changes in the agrarian structure are taken as the exclusive criterion. Despite that, they received adequate media coverage, and the matter was raised even in the Imperial Legislative Council by Rashbehari Ghose.

The impact of the revolts of 1893-94 fell in Sibsagar also. At a public meeting, the inhabitants of the district vehemently resented the sudden increase of land revenue.

Though the lower- strata of the peasantry had nothing in comparison to the dominant land owning caste, in spite of that, they did not revolt against them. Rather, forgetting their economic and social disparity fought together under one roof against their common enemy i.e. the British.

The revolts of 1893-94 failed, but it is a matter of great pride that the peasants of Assam, at least, became able to defend themselves against the mighty British. It is also because of their movements, the rate of revenue was reduced to 53% first and finally, to 32.7%. The revolts of 1893-94 may not be famous like the chivalrous and gallant deeds of Mangal Pandey or Lakshmi Bai; nevertheless, how the peasants of those regions fought against the mighty British, it is a rare instance in the history of India. Whatever might be the result of the revolts of 1893-94; the colonial government could realize the united strength and might of the peasants in their revolts.

The revolts of 1893-94 paved the way for organized challenge to the British rule. It heralded the beginning of a new era of peasant awakening in Assam by effectively upholding the value and unity of organized resistance to governmental injustice. Though the cultivating and non-cultivating classes took part in the revolts of 1893-94, it was the rural poor who gave them militant character.

One noticeable aspect is that, in spite of Government of India's abatement order of revenue, the order of abatement did not reach Assam soon, due to the red-tapism of the colonial bureaucrats. But, the cool and calm peasants they did not resort to the path of violence against the authority still then, despite having all reasonable scope and ground. It substantiated the patience of the peasants.

The revolts of 1893-94 were guided by reasons, not by passions and emotions. The peasants reacted and fought against exploitation and injustice; not fought for their rights, privileges and social status. 'The Indian Nation' on the 1st April, 1894, regarded the demands of the *raij-mels* as real, not sentimental. According to the paper, the demand of revenue was heavier in Assam than in Bengal.

Though quelled with brutal force, the uprisings not only exposed the defects of the British rule, but also proved beyond doubt that any attempt, at socio-economic reconstruction without corresponding improvement in the moral and material condition of the people, was bound to be abortive. What was needed in Assam was the infusion of energy and enterprise into individual character, not malicious disregard for the problems of the *ryots*.

The peasantry and the workers who constituted the majority of the Indian masses, had showed their historic resentment against the government in 1893-94 without waiting for elite leadership, though the latter also finally took role in that.

As against the *brahmins* of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan who were occasionally found working as tenants of Rajputs and Jat landowners, the *brahmins* of Assam, on the contrary, got their land ploughed by others. The *brahmins* of Assam in colonial period were high and educated class and gave even the leadership in the outbreaks of 1893-94.

Unlike the two Tamil peasants' castes, the *vellalas* and the *padaiyachis* who wanted to be recorded as higher castes like the *vaishyas* and the *vanniyakula kshatriyas*, there was found no such upward caste mobility among the peasants of Assam.

A most important value of westernization is humanitarianism. Equalitarianism and secularism, both are included in humanitarianism. Significantly and surprisingly, the government neglected all these human values; otherwise, there would have been no revolts in 1893-94. When most of the educated and well-to-do sections of the society tolerated the exploitation of the government and remained silent, the illiterate rural masses protested the policy of the government, and had taken the path of revolts. It is really, an important and laudable aspect to be noticed.

In the revolts of 1893-94, we find some important things. Some of the higher castes gave up their *sanskritic* value in order to have interaction with the lower castes. For example, we can mention the name of Jogeswar Goswami of Byaskuchi who in spite of high position in the society, mixed up with the masses in general.

Significantly, the peasants of Assam of 1893-94 gave importance only on their economic problems, forgetting their religious and community bar. The Muslims of Assam took a leading role in 1893-94. For example, they took a vital role in the revolt of Patharughat of 1893-94, maintaining and upholding their legacy of enmity that their ancestors had against the British. Of the 140, who died in 1894 at Patharughat, 64 had been identified. Of them, 7 were Muslims. In addition to that, the main leader of the Panatup- *mels* of Lachima was Babri Phakir.

The revolts of 1893-94 were a dispute between the ruler and the ruled. The colonial government blamed the peasants of Assam exonerating itself for all acts. They kept concealed all these acts only for their colonial interest. The dead were buried, but how the sins could be!

The demands of the peasants were real, and the burden pressed upon the land was heavier even than in Bengal. So, their movements against the authority could totally be justified. But, the late arrival of the abatement order of revenue could not be justified. The rightful demand of the peasants placed before the authority for compliance and consideration, could not be a crime using lethal weapons on them. The colonial government could have evaded the mass slaughtering with patient consideration adopting give and take policy instead of shooting and slaughtering the mass people whimsically. A black spot on the civilized British nation, of course, not desired by the British Commons, but caused by some of their trigger happy cynics without trying to understand the wants of their subjects.

Glossary:

1. *ryots*: tenant farmer,
2. *zamindars* : landlords,
3. *hats* : small village market,
4. *Raij-mels* : people's assembly,
5. *Sanskritic* : high and sound, upward,
6. *de-sanskritic* : lower mobility, degradation of moral value
7. *Sarvajanic Sabha* : a popular and universal conference ,
8. *kisan-sabha* : conference of farmers , zamindari : feudalistic ,
9. *vellalas & padaiyachis* : two peasant castes of the Tamils of India,
10. *mahantas* :second highest caste of Assam, they are Hindus ,
11. *brahmins* : first highest and priestly class of the Hindus of India,
12. *patidars* : an Indian caste found mostly in Gujarat, they are Hindus,
13. *vaishyas* : merchants/ traders, third caste among the four castes of the Hindus
14. *dolois* : high caste of the Tiwa community of Assam, they are Hindus ,
15. *mukhtars* : head of a village, a lawyer in India during 19th & early 20th centuries,
16. *gosains* : religious heads of devotees of various tribes & castes of Assam.

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