



Cover Page



RAIJ MEL AND ITS RESISTANCE TO COLONIAL EXPLOITATION IN ASSAM: A HISTORICAL STUDY

Nuruz Zaman Zakir Hussain

Asst. Professor, Deptt. of History, Juria College, Nagaon, Assam

Abstract

Assam's traditional and popular People's Assembly, Raji Mel, was an important part of the collective resistance to British exploitation. During British rule, there were numerous significant resistance movements in Assam led by Raji Mel or the People's Assembly. Discontent among the peasants of various indigenous communities, including the Ahoms, Khasis, and Nagas, who sought to defend their autonomy, land, and cultural identity from British exploitation, was the primary cause of these uprisings. Protesting the British policy of prohibiting poppy cultivation, taxing Tamul-Paan, and increasing land revenue—all of which significantly harmed peasants—prompted the immediate organization of Raji Mel. The Raji Mel challenged the injustices of colonial rule through peaceful assemblies, petitions, and awakening the peasants. The Raji mel in the Barama region were very strong, and the largest Raji mel was held in Pana gaon Sapori. The Patharughat, Rangia, and Sarthebari regions of Assam also had notable Raji Mels. The present study would make details analysis of the historical study of Raji Mel and resistance to colonial exploitation in Assam. The continuous movements of the peasants strengthened unity and laid the groundwork for the subsequent anti-colonial movement in Assam, despite the fact that the British frequently suppressed the movements led by Raji Mel.

Keywords: Peasants, British, Uprising, Raji Mel

Introduction:

The word "Raji Mel" is derived from the Assamese language, where "Raji" means "the People" and "Mel" means "an assembly or gathering." In Assam, popular people's assemblies were the norm. Assam's Raji Mel, or People's Assembly, was a crucial institution for organizing the peasants to resist British exploitation. The British invaded Assam in 1826 following the Treaty of Yandabu. Assam's social, economic, and political conditions had changed significantly with the arrival of the British. To fulfill their colonial goals, the British began implementing the policies in Assam. They introduced a new revenue system in Assam for their own benefit, becoming the landowners and completely ruining the peasants' economic situation. As a result of widespread dissatisfaction with the British, peasants in various districts of Assam began organizing Raji Mels. These Raji Mels sparked several peasant revolts in Assam's Phulaguri, Rangia, Lachima, and Patharughat. In Assam, a series of agrarian movements was launched by the peasants to redress their grievances. Through Raji Mels or the People's Assembly, they expressed their dissatisfaction. In the 19th century, these peasant movements led by Raji Mel made a significant contribution to the development of a national consciousness in Assam.

Review of the literature: The popular people's gathering at the village level, known as a "Raji Mel," was a venue for making collective decisions in Assam's favour. As an informal community council in the pre-colonial era, Raji Mel evolved into a political organization of collective peasant action to resist colonial exploitation during the colonial era. Raji Mels across Phulaguri, Rangia, Lachima, and Pathorughat emerge as a political gathering to resist colonial exploitation. Numerous academics, including Amalendu Guha and S., have contributed valuable writings and works on this topic. The most prominent are Saikia. In addition, several topics have been covered in well-known magazines and journals, such as the International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Social Development, which focuses particularly on the subject of Raji Mel. Therefore, relevant literary sources have been gathered from a variety of valuable books, journals, and magazines in order to fulfill this topic.



Cover Page



2 2 7 7 - 7 8 8 1



Objective of the paper:

The following are the primary goals of the paper:

1. To examine the origin and nature of the Raj Mel in Assam.
2. To analyse the role of Raj Mel in mobilizing public opinion against colonial exploitation in Assam.
3. To determine how Raj Mel helped the popular resistance peasant movement in Assam during the colonial era.
4. To comprehend Raj Mel's historical significance.

Methodology:

Every research work needs a scientific method to make it more fruitful. Because the current research primarily relies on historical and analytical data. Therefore, an analytical and historical approach has been taken with the intention of making it more fruitful. In addition, a number of well-known books, journals, and magazines on the subject are notable highlights.

Raj Mel as resistance platforms: Phulaguri uprising (1861): Raj Mel's Phulaguri Uprising was the first peasant uprising in Assam to oppose the British policy of economic exploitation. With the introduction of the British new revenue system, the peasants' situation deteriorated. The main cause of this uprising was the opium policy of the British government. The opium policy of the British government became very miserable for the people of the Nowgong district, which occupied the highest position in poppy cultivation in Assam. The British government has banned poppy cultivation but continues to sell opium in all districts. In the meantime, a rumor was spread that the government would impose a tax on the cultivation of tamul (areca-nut) and pan (betel vine). The peasants were dissatisfied with the British policy because they were unwilling to accept the British economic exploitation policy, which was extremely detrimental to the peasants. The locals organized a people's assembly, or Raj Mels, in order to express their outrage at the British government's order. One of these, Raj Mels, was held in Phulaguri on September 17, 1861, to oppose the prohibition of poppy cultivation. Hence, to protest the British policy, the peasants of Phulaguri, mostly the Tiwa community of the Phulaguri area of Nowgong district, led a revolt in 1861. Through the organization of Raj Mel, the area's peasants marched to the Sadar Court of Nowgong to protest the prohibition on poppy cultivation and considered taxing tamul and pan. But Lt Herbert Sconce refused to hear their complaints. Then, beginning on October 15, the disgruntled peasants held a Raj Mel for five days to discuss their future strategy for resolving their issues. Over three to four thousand peasants had gathered, the majority of them equipped with lathis. The police failed in their attempt to disperse the gatherings. On 18th October, Lt Singer, the Assistant Commissioner of Nowgong, arrived at Phulaguri with a force. The people stated that they were prepared to file complaints with higher authorities if he fulfilled their request. When the British refused to accept the peasants' demand, the peasants attacked Singer with a stick, and he died on the spot, and his dead body was thrown into the Kolong River. This peasant uprising is known as "Phulaguri Dhawa" in the History of Assam.

The Assam Riots: From 1893 to 1994, the Phulaguri uprising failed to put an end to the British government's policy of increasing land revenue and providing government opium, which was good for the British but bad for the Assamese peasants. The British government increased the rate of land revenue in the Assam valley districts from 15 to 50 percent between 1868 and 1869 for both rupit and non-rupit lands. A cadastral survey, ordered meanwhile, was completed during the years 1882-93. While the land revenue demand increased substantially because of new additions to the settled area, and the detection of concealed cultivation. The conditions of peasantry worsened very much in the period 1891-1901 due to a further rise in opium rates, the devastating earthquake of 1897, which caused the deaths of more than 1500 people, and added to their misery. The Chief Commissioner of Assam at the time, Sir William Ward, revised his assessment and increased land revenue. The revised rates in the Brahmaputra Valley initially involvement on enhancement of 53% on average, but in many villages, it was as high as 70 to 100%. The people in Kamrup and Central Assam spontaneously organized themselves under the Raj Mels to decide upon a no-tax campaign. People who have been misled are not required



Cover Page



to pay the higher rates anywhere. 3000 people participated in a demonstration on December 30 against the British government's unpopular actions. With an additional force of police, District Magistrate Ma Cabe arrived in Rangia on January 6, 1894. He was able to make 15 arrests on January 8th. To demonstrate against the enhancement of land revenue, the postponement of the collection of land revenue, and the release of their detained comrades, people marched toward the Rangia thana on January 10. When 2000 and 3000 lathi armed people began to close the thana, he ordered a firing. There were no fatalities, according to a report that appeared in the "Hindoo Patriot" on February 5, 1894. The mauzas of Upar Barbhog and Sarukhetri, as well as the tahsils of Patidarang, Nalbari, Barama, and Bajali, made it challenging for the government to collect revenue. On January 29, 1894, the mouzadar and mandal were brutally attacked at Lachima, which is in the Sarukhetri Mauza of the Kamrup district. They were going to collect money from the villages.

Peasant Revolt of Lachima (1894): Among the peasants' revolts that ravaged Assam from 1860 to 1894, an important revolt was the Lachima revolt in the Kamrup district that took place in January 1894. The cause of the uprising at Lachima was the enhanced tax imposed by the British. In spite of the Phulaguri uprising, the British organized a strict collection of the land revenue and increased it by 100 percent. The peasants asked the British government to lower the tax, but the British government said no. In a Raj Mel, the peasants of the Lachima, Nalbari, Rangia, Panagaon, Serthebari, and Bajali etc regions decided not to pay the increased British Government revenue. British authorities sent Madhab Chandra Bordoloi, the BARPETA circle officer, to arrest 75 people and transport them to the Lachima rest camp because the peasants refused to pay the increased tax. The camp at Lachima was surrounded by the local peasants, who compelled the release of all of the prisoners. However, the prisoners were freed after being threatened by 3,000 peasants. 59 rebels were detained by McCabe, the deputy commissioner.

The Patharughat Uprising: The Patharughat Uprising, which took place on January 28, 1894, in the Darrang district, was one of the major peasant revolts that swept through Assam from 1860 to 1894. The British Government's imposition of increased land revenue on the peasants was the primary factor in Patharughat's uprising. The peasants of Kalaigaon, Mangaldoi, Sipajar, and Patharughat Tehsils of Mangaldoi sub-division organized Raj Mel in their own areas. They adopted a no-tax campaign and protested the increased rate of land revenue through the Raj Mels. From January 26 to January 28, 1894, the region's peasants planned a massive rally in Patharughat. A large armed British force reached the place on 27th January and captured the peasants who refused to pay the revenue. The peasants were enraged by this, and 200 of them surrounded the Police Superintendent, Berington, who had gone to collect money. He got away and made it to the rest camp. The rest camp was reached by a group of approximately 2000 stick-wielding peasants.

Findings: During British rule in Assam, the peasant uprising was organized by holding Raj Mels, which were caused by the peasants' dissatisfaction with the significant increase in land tax. The peasants were demonstrating against the British government's economic exploitation through Raj Mels. It is seen that through Raj Mels peasant discussed their burning issues and unitedly organized uprisings against the British, which reflected peasant discontentment in Assam. By way of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, the British took over Assam's management. It was challenging for the Assamese peasants to pay the substantial revenue to the British government. The Raj Mel in Assam was against the high taxation imposed by the British Government. The British introduced a new revenue system in Assam that demonstrated the nature and goals of British rule in Assam and placed a greater emphasis on revenue collection than on agriculture or alleviating peasant suffering and poverty. It was not true that these peasant uprisings were the evil result of the Raj Mels, even though contemporary British administrators thought so. The peasants attempted to express their miserable economic situation under British rule by organizing these rajj-mels. The peasants used the Raj Mels as a significant platform to voice their displeasure and oppose British exploitation. Assamese rural residents gained political awareness and a sense of national consciousness as a result of Raj Mels, which ultimately sparked several peasant movements in Assam.

Conclusion: The Raj Mels, or People's Assembly, in Assam accelerated the 19th-century peasant movements in Assam, as can be seen from the above discussion. Raj Mels played a significant role in bringing attention to the ghastly conditions and suffering of the poor Assamese peasants as well as the nature of British rule in Assam. As the British harassed the peasants in Assam by imposing a high tax that they were unable to pay, their suffering intensified. Other cultivable land



Cover Page



revenue increased dramatically in contrast to the nominal tax on plantation land or its absence. As a result of the peasants' failure to receive a response to their petitions to the British government, they became enraged and the Assamese uprisings began. Though the peasant movements were dominated by strong hands, but it proved that the common masses of Assam became aware of the exploitation of the British rule. This movement was a clear rebellion against the British government in Assam. Gradually, they began to realize that it would not be possible for them to redress their grievances under colonial rule, so they actively joined in the national movements to end British rule in the country.

References:

1. Baruah. S. L, A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshiram Monaharlal publisher, New Delhi, 2015.
2. Goswami Priyam, The History of Assam from Yandaboo to Partition, Orient Black Swan, 2016, New Delhi,
3. Gait Edward, A History of Assam, Spectrum, New Delhi, 2011.
4. Barpujari, H. K, The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. –V, Publication Board, Assam, 2007.
5. Barman, Romani, History of Assam (1826 - 1947), Ashok Publication, Panbazar, Ghy-1, 2014
6. Kalita, Joysree, Colonial Rule in Assam (1826 – 1947), Ashok Publication, Panbazar, Ghy-1,2011.
7. Barpujari, H.K (eds) Political History of Assam (1826 - 1947) Vol- 1 Publication Board of Assam. Guwahati, 1999.
8. Dutta, K.N. Landmarks of the freedom struggle in Assam, Guwahati, 1969.